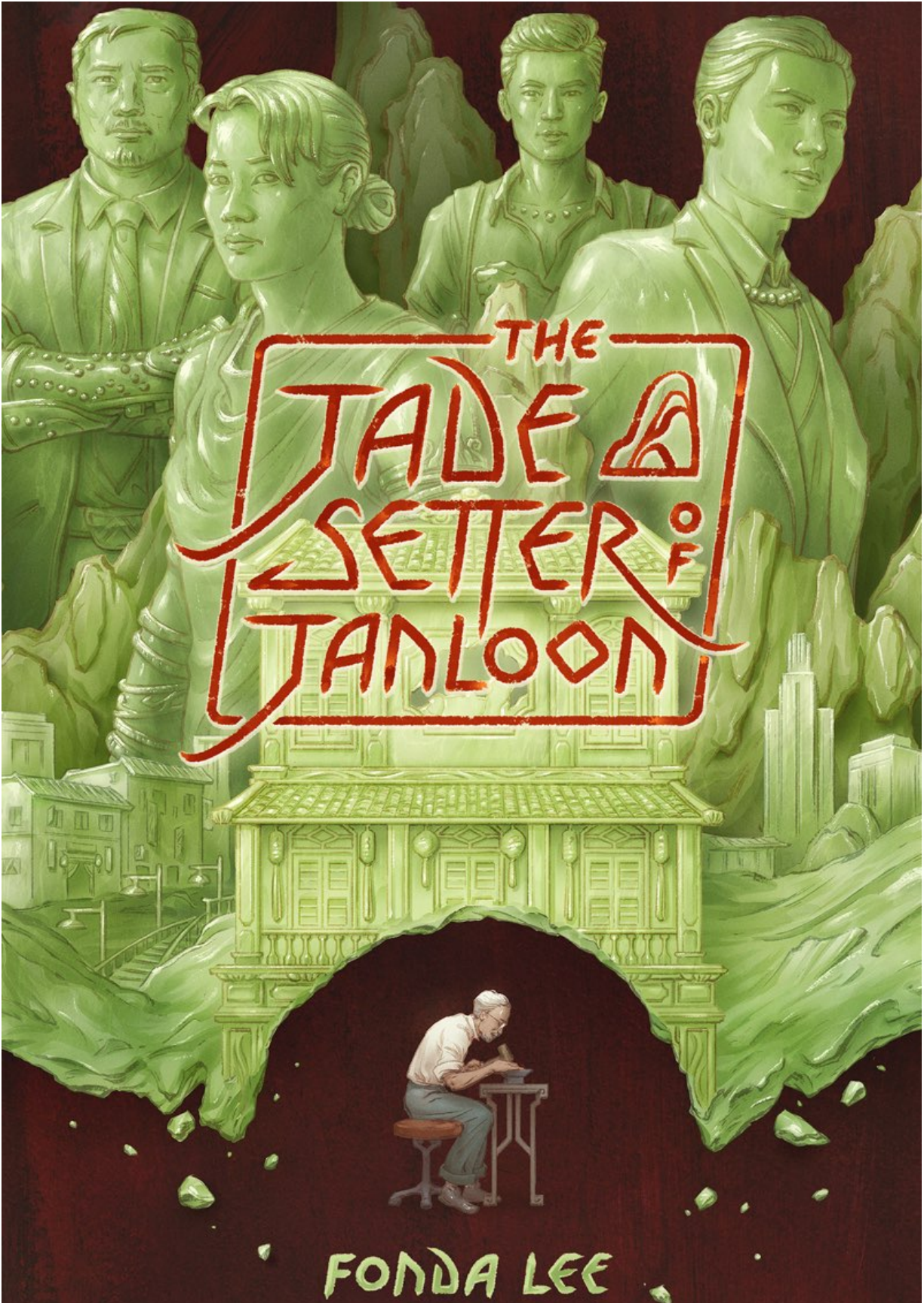


THE
JADE
SETTER
OF
TANLOON

FONDA LEE



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The Jade Setter of Janloon

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*For Mrs. Carson.
You were right about me.*

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CHAPTER ONE

THE APPRENTICE

THE DUEL OCCURRED AT NOON IN THE PARKING LOT OF A JOLLO PLUS MART and lasted under three minutes. Afterward, an ambulance arrived, but the medics left when they saw there was nothing to be done about the man on the asphalt—a powerful blast of Channeling had stopped his heart. Pulo had never seen a man killed so quickly and decisively.

“My blade is clean.” The victor, a junior Fist of the Mountain clan, ceremoniously wiped the length of his moon blade on the inside of his sleeve before bending to remove the jade from his opponent’s body. Gam Oben had a dark complexion and a sharp chin, and even the simplest of his movements seemed lithe and infused with dangerous energy.

Pulo turned away, self-consciously fingering the two jade studs in his left ear. He and Gam both wore jade, they were of a similar size and build, and a similar age; Pulo was twenty-two years old and Gam perhaps a couple of years older. Unfortunately, that was where the similarities ended. Gam Oben, Pulo thought with a sigh of resignation, was as impressive a jade warrior as Pulo had once imagined himself becoming.

The impromptu crowd that had gathered to watch the contest milled about, discussing the dramatic outcome. It was uncommon for clean-bladed duels between members of the same clan to end fatally. Of course, it was the prerogative of the winner to take his adversary’s life in addition to his jade, but why eliminate a man from your own side and create bad feelings

with that person's family unnecessarily? However, these were not usual circumstances.

Pulo left the scene and hurried back toward the shop. Gam was still accepting congratulations and enjoying his victory, but it wouldn't be long before he made his way over to the jade setter's. Isin-jen would want Pulo to be there, to help behind the counter.

The sidewalks were clogged with streams of people enjoying the city's damp but warm late-spring weather: well-dressed women browsing window displays of the latest foreign fashions; office workers lining up to buy lunch from food stands selling hot noodles and barbecue meat on skewers; petitioners visiting the Temple District's houses of worship to hang prayer cards on the devotional trees. Ordinary people, most of whom didn't wear jade, going about their normal lives. One wouldn't think that mere minutes ago and a few blocks away, a man had died, and with him, whatever hopes and dreams he might've had.

Pulo weaved through the crush of pedestrians, his eyes on the sidewalk, his thoughts turned inward. What would it be like to offer or accept a clean blade, knowing you might be killed in the contest? How had Gam and his rival felt in the seconds before the fight, as they saluted each other and offered up prayers to the gods? Pulo had always wondered: If it weren't for the ironclad neutrality of the Haedo Shield clan, which forbade dueling for jade, would he have the thick blood to risk his life?

Isin's squat shop was sandwiched between two taller, newer buildings—a twenty-four-hour foot spa on one side and a three-story record shop on the other. The modest sign over the door was hand-painted in a dated style. *Carving. Setting. Piercing.* It was fading to illegibility, but that hardly mattered; everyone knew where to find the best jade setter in the city of Janloon, and likely the whole island of Kekon. Skyrocketing real estate prices would've made it profitable for a developer to buy the shop, demolish it, and erect a high-rise building in its place. That wouldn't

happen, as no one would dream of forcing Isin out. His services were too renowned and highly valued by jade warriors in all the Green Bone clans.

Pulo pushed through the front door, causing the bell over it to jangle its familiar tinny chime. “Gam won the duel,” he announced. “He’s probably on his way here right now.”

Isin did not look up from the small table where he sat examining a wristwatch with a jade face. He moved the loupe away and sighed regretfully. “The crack is deep; even if we perform the repair, it won’t be reliable in a battle.” He handed the watch to Malla and said, “Call the customer and see whether he wants it returned, or carved down and reset.”

“Gam Oben is the Second Fist of the Mountain,” Pulo said, leaning over the counter to get the master jade setter’s attention. “If he’s pleased with our work, he could put in a good word for us. With clan patronage, we could expand the shop. We’d have twice as much space if we move out of the Temple District and into, say, Sogen or Cherry Grove. Or we could keep this place, but set up a second location. I could manage it for you.”

Isin settled his bifocals back onto the ridge of his nose and gazed patiently up at his apprentice. His thick gray eyebrows twitched over eyes that blinked too much as a result of countless hours spent doing fine work under bright lights. Pulo thought his master’s short wiry beard and placidly dignified expression made him look like an aged terrier in a wool jacket.

“Your job is to learn the craft of jade setting,” Isin reminded him.

Pulo replied with a touch of frustration he couldn’t hide. “I’ve been doing that all this time, but we can’t run a successful business on technical skill alone. We need to make savvier business decisions. At least consider renovating the front of the shop.”

“The shop’s fine as it is,” Isin said, adjusting a tray in the display case.

Pulo bit his tongue and glanced at Malla. She gave him a sympathetic look but shrugged, as if to say, *What did you expect?* It wasn’t as if they hadn’t had this argument before. Pulo knew why Isin refused to adopt his

suggestions. A major expansion required capital, and the best way to secure a loan was by asking for patronage from one of the two major clans. Moving the shop would also mean deciding whose territory to locate in. Those decisions would make Isin a tribute-paying Lantern Man. It meant choosing a side. Pulo was willing to leave the minor Haedo Shield clan and its policy of neutrality. Isin wasn't.

Before Pulo could press his argument further, a gleaming ZT Toro pulled up to the curb in front of the shop. Three men stepped out of the car. Pulo could Perceive their jade auras before they reached the door, as a bright energetic hum in his mind.

Without prompting, Malla turned and went into the workroom behind the counter, her loose, curly hair bobbing against her straight shoulders as she disappeared from view. Malla was Abukei, which was both an advantage and a detriment in the jade-setting profession. On one hand, she was not affected by jade and thus never had to be concerned about overexposure, which might lead to illness or death in other people. But prejudice ran deep. Green Bone warriors might appreciate the traditional jade-carving techniques of the island's indigenous artists, but that didn't mean they wanted to see one in the front of the shop.

The door swung open with a loud jingling of the entry bell. As Pulo had expected, Gam Oben came in, his dark face still flushed and his jade aura crackling with the residual adrenaline of the fight. Behind him came two others—another Fist that Pulo didn't recognize, followed by a huge man who was impossible not to recognize.

Isin clasped his hands together and touched them to his forehead in a respectful salute. Pulo hastily followed suit. "Gont-jen," Isin said mildly. "I'm always honored to have the Horn of the Mountain clan visit my humble business. What can I do for you today?"

There were Green Bones, Pulo thought, and then there were *Green Bones*. Anyone who wore jade, who'd trained in the six traditional

disciplines and graduated from one of Kekon's martial academies was a Green Bone who'd earned the suffix *jen*—even someone like him, a jade setter's apprentice with only two jade stones.

Men like Gont Asch were different. Second in authority only to the Pillar, the Horn was the top warrior who commanded all the Fists and the Fingers on the military side of the clan. Gont's massive shoulders were crisscrossed with raised white scars, and he wore his copious amount of jade encrusted on striking leather armguards that Isin had created for him years ago. He seemed to fill the room with his imposing frame as he turned slowly, taking in the small shop and everyone inside. Pulo was sure the Horn could Perceive Malla's hidden presence in the back of the building, and Pulo's own heart thumping.

"One of my Fists has come into possession of some new jade." Gont's voice was a low, even baritone, unexpectedly smooth and congenial.

Isin turned toward Gam, who was examining the glass display case of ring settings. "Far do your enemies flee, Gam-jen," he congratulated the Fist.

"I slept well last night," Gam said, politely but curtly deflecting the praise. He laid his spoils on the countertop. "I need the rings resized, and I want to have the studs remounted and to get nose piercings for them."

"Very good, Gam-jen," Isin said, examining the jade. "We can do all of that right now." He measured Gam's ring size, then handed the rings to Pulo, who placed them on a tray and took them into the back of the shop for Malla to work on.

"A half size smaller, simple enough," Isin's assistant said, turning the bands under a worklight. "I'll solder a layer of matching gold onto the inner metal band and he won't lose any of the jade at all." She looked up at Pulo, hovering over her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Pulo shifted back, dropping his eyes. "Nothing," he muttered, before blurting out, "It's not right that you hide back here every time customers

come in. You ought to be out in the front of the shop with us, getting credit for the work you do.” Pulo’s face flushed with discomfort as he glanced up into her surprised expression. Malla was a talented jeweler and her detailed handiwork was flawless. She was a patient person who would be naturally good at the front counter. When Malla smiled, always slowly and with her mouth closed, her cheeks rounded into plump bronze hills under her large, amber-flecked brown eyes.

Malla was a similar age to Pulo, but she’d been working for Isin for longer than Pulo had been an apprentice. Pulo had never seen the master jade setter order Malla away from public view, but that had seemed to be the unspoken expectation from the beginning. At first, Pulo hadn’t questioned it, but now it increasingly bothered him. Given his matchless repute as a master craftsman, was the old man really so concerned about superstitious bigots objecting to the idea of a stone-eye working in his shop and handling their jade?

If only Malla wasn’t Abukei.

Pulo set his mouth. “I’m going to talk to Isin about it.”

“Please don’t,” Malla said quickly. “It’s not Isin’s fault, it’s...” She turned away from him, embarrassed, but not before Pulo glimpsed an anxious, almost fearful shadow cross her face. “I’d rather be in the back room, honestly. I’m more comfortable here.”

“But—” Pulo began.

“It’s kind of you to worry about me, but you don’t have to do that.” Malla gave him a small appeasing smile and her tone was polite, but it was clear she didn’t want to talk about the issue anymore. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she picked up the first of Gam’s rings. “Shouldn’t you go back out there to help Isin?”

Dissatisfied but unable to argue, Pulo returned to the front of the store. By now, Isin had seated Gam in the side room and was unwrapping a sterile piercing needle. He’d marked the spots where Gam wanted his four new

jade studs—a bridge piercing, and two nostril piercings, one on each side. At Pulo's appearance, the master jade setter said, "Gam-jen, with your permission, I'd like my apprentice to do the work. I vouch for his abilities completely."

Gam's eyes slid over to Pulo with mild interest. He shrugged in acquiescence. Pulo washed his hands and put on latex gloves. Isin had given him a simple task that he'd performed many times, but he'd never before handled the jade of a Green Bone as highly ranked as Gam. Was Isin giving him this responsibility, publicly demonstrating his confidence in his apprentice, as conciliation for repeatedly shooting down his other ideas? Was he giving Pulo a chance to be noticed and remembered by Mountain clan leaders?

When Pulo picked up the remounted jade studs, a faint tingle warmed his fingers and spread up his arms. The jade energy sharpened his senses for a moment; the light in the room brightened, every detail seemed crisper and every noise more distinct, like the improvement in a broadcast when a nudged television antenna receives a clearer signal. He wondered how much more the jade would do for Gam once he wore it. Thinking of the duel he'd seen, he imagined the Fist's leaps of Lightness being faster and higher, his reflexes honed by greater Perception, his Strength and Steel more unassailable, his Deflection more powerful and his Channeling even more lethal. A familiar envy stirred in Pulo's chest as he gave Gam one nostril piercing, then the other.

"How long have you been a jade setter's apprentice?" Gam asked, not with great interest, but no doubt wondering whether to trust his skills.

"Four years, Gam-jen." Four years of labor for an exacting but unambitious master in a profession he'd fallen into through no desire of his own.

"I didn't know Isin took on apprentices," Gam said. "You must be the first one."

Pulo hesitated. “Isin-jen agreed to train me because I’m also from the Haedo Shield clan. When he retires, he wants the shop to stay open to all Green Bones. I’m good at detailed work and have a naturally high jade tolerance, so he thought I could learn the craft.” He didn’t mention that he’d had no choice in the matter. His aunt was one of the elders of the clan and had already put forth his name to Isin with the expectation that he accept the position.

When Pulo finished the bridge piercing, he handed Gam a mirror. The Fist turned his face back and forth. He nodded in satisfaction at the way the new jade stood out bright and arresting against his dark skin. “Isin-jen,” Gam called out to the master jade setter, “your apprentice did a good job. What do you think? Does this jade look better on me than it did on poor Taso Gumi?”

“The jade is where it belongs, Gam-jen,” Isin said equably.

Isin was known to have an astonishing memory; he remembered the jade pieces he’d carved and set for thousands of Green Bones over the course of twenty years, and he often saw his work change hands. The jade setter might spend weeks painstakingly designing an elaborate jade necklace for one warrior, then a year later, he would calmly and without question destroy his creation and remount all the jade stones into a belt for another man who’d fought and killed the original owner. The Temple District was one of the few areas of Janloon that was perpetually neutral territory; Isin saw customers from all the clans. They trusted him, as he would never spread rumors or betray the confidence of anyone. Of course, there were other jade setters in other parts of Janloon who serviced one clan or another exclusively, but none of them were as talented as Isin Nakokun.

As Gam stood, Pulo asked, “Was it hard to take the jade? To kill a member of your own clan?” Only after the question had impulsively left his mouth did it occur to him that the Fist might not take well to the loaded question. When Gam gave him a narrow-eyed look of surprise, Pulo began

to stammer an apology. “I’m sorry if that sounded rude, Gam-jen, it’s only that I saw the duel, and I wondered—”

“No,” Gam answered, bluntly but seemingly unoffended. “Taso had his chance. The leadership of the clan has been settled. If any Fist slanders his own Pillar, he ought to expect to be challenged by those who are loyal, and to pay with his life if he loses.” Before he strode out of the room, he looked back at Pulo with a curious, faintly patronizing glance and tilted his sharp chin. “Life must be simpler in the Haedo Shield clan.”

That was true enough, Pulo admitted. The Mountain clan was the largest in Kekon. When its longtime Pillar had passed away last year without naming an heir, a brief but bloody struggle for the leadership had ensued. Afterward, the clan had fallen into line behind the victor, but a few vocal dissenters like Taso Gumi were still being made into dramatic examples.

Haedo Shield had no such public dramas. It did not have a Pillar, nor did it have a Horn to oversee Fists and Fingers, or a Weather Man to manage the clan’s business interests. Instead, it was governed by a council of five elders who maintained a low profile and whose names were barely known outside of the clan. It offered no patronage and took no tribute, relying only on public funds for its operations. The clan’s Green Bones trained in their own small but rigorous martial school for one purpose: to protect the ceremonial royal family and guard government buildings and functions. In their distinctive flat caps and sashes, the Shieldbearers of Haedo Shield were more civil servants than warriors.

Isin brought Malla’s handiwork out to the counter. Gam’s rings were now a perfect fit. As the Fist put them on, Pulo tried not to keep glancing over at Gont Asch. The Horn and his other Fist had been standing near the door patiently, Gont’s thick arms crossed over his chest. Now, he came up to the counter and placed a long, cloth-wrapped object in front of Isin.

“One more task, Isin-jen,” Gont rumbled. He unfolded the black cloth to reveal a sheathed moon blade. Pulo sucked in an awed breath. The moon

blade was the traditional weapon of Green Bone warriors and this one was a superlative specimen: thirty-two inches long, a slightly curved single-edged twenty-one-inch white carbon steel blade in an elaborately carved sheath, set into a hilt inlaid with bands of brilliant jade stones and a carved jade pommel.

“This is the moon blade of the Pillar, Ayt Madashi,” Gont said. “It was given to her by her father. The pommel is loose and needs to be repaired without damage to any of the jade. The Pillar has made it clear that she trusts only the most reliable and skilled jade setter to do the work for her.”

Isin studied the weapon. He fished out the small notepad from his breast pocket, wrote out a repair order, and tore the thin customer copy out, handing it to the Horn. “Come back at the end of the day tomorrow.”

Gont and his two Fists left the shop. As soon as they were gone, Pulo burst out, “The Pillar’s moon blade, I can’t believe it!” He bent over the priceless object, enthralled, unable to resist reaching out to touch it. This must be the weapon Ayt Mada had used to kill her rivals to become Pillar. What would it feel like to wield something so powerful in battle?

He looked up at Isin, torn between admiration and indignation. “Isin-jen, the Pillar of the Mountain knows who you are, and out of all the jade setters in the city, she trusts only *you* with her own weapon? Why *wouldn’t* we ask for clan patronage?”

Malla came out from the back room and bent over the counter next to Pulo to admire the moon blade. She was close enough that Pulo caught a whiff of the dusty sweat on her neck mingled with the citrus scent of her shampoo. “Malla,” he said, trying to recruit her to his side, “don’t you think we ought to move the shop, or at least renovate it? Wouldn’t you rather have a larger and better workroom instead of that stuffy space we have now?”

“That would be nice, I suppose,” Malla said, “but I don’t mind the shop the way it is. It’s the best jade-setting service in the city because of Isin-jen.

He's kept it this way for so long that if we changed anything, he wouldn't be able to find his way around anymore." She gave the master jade setter a teasing pat on the hand.

Isin looked at both of them over the top of his glasses. "That's true," he said, with a tug on the corners of his mouth that for him constituted a smile. "I'm too old to change."

That was simply an excuse, Pulo thought sourly. Isin was in his midfifties, not even that old. He seemed aged only because of his quiet, methodical personality, the weathered texture of his face, and the calluses on his hands. Pulo had heard people say that as a young man, Isin Nakokun had been a formidable jade warrior. During the Many Nations War, he'd fought alongside famous Green Bone war heroes like Ayt Yugontin and Kaul Seningtun to overthrow the foreign occupation of Kekon. Watching his master wipe the dust from his bifocals with a square of cloth, Pulo found that difficult to imagine.

The door banged open again and Pulo jumped, thinking for a second that the Mountain Green Bones had returned. Then he exclaimed, "Godsdamnit, Nuo, haven't we told you not to come in here during business hours?"

Nuo ignored him. "Uncle Isin, I need to borrow five hundred dien. Just to get me through the week with my landlord, and I promise I'll pay it back by next Fourthday, on my mother's grave, please, Uncle Isin."

Isin's nephew Nuo was a year older than Pulo, but as far as Pulo could tell, he was a parasite who was always asking for money and was never going to support himself with any sort of reputable job. For a while, he'd tried his hand at raising and fighting gamecocks, but he'd lost all his birds in matches and to disease. Then he'd gotten involved in a questionable pyramid scheme and would come into the shop to try to sell them suspicious herbal supplements, several jars of which remained untouched in

the workroom's cabinet. Supposedly, he now had a job at a temp agency, but either his job was fictional, or it didn't pay.

Nuo's shifty gaze fell onto the magnificent weapon on the counter and his eyes lit up as brightly as an Autumn Festival lamp. "Whose moon blade is that?" He reached a hand toward it. "Holy shit, is that what I think it is? Only the Ayt family uses that hilt design."

"Don't touch it," Pulo snapped, quickly wrapping the valuable moon blade back up in the black cloth. "How do you know that anyway?"

Nuo's nostrils flared and he gave Pulo a withering look. "I read about it in a magazine, dumbfuck. The famous Green Bones like the Ayts and the Kauls all have one-of-a-kind custom-made Da Tanori blades." Nuo wetted his lips and his eyes darted back to the cloth bundle as Pulo stowed it out of sight under the counter. "I bet you've worked on a lot of those special blades, haven't you, Uncle Isin?"

Isin gave his nephew a look of disappointed forbearance and shuffled over to unlock the cash register. Pulo and Malla watched in tight-lipped silence as the jade setter removed a stack of bills from the register and wearily peeled off several of them for Nuo, who stood with his hand held out expectantly, still shooting glances in the direction the moon blade had vanished.

Pulo ground his teeth in frustration. After all his efforts to convince Isin to invest in the business, instead of seeking patronage or saving up funds, the old man threw money away. No wonder the shop never seemed to grow profits, despite all the demand for Isin's skills. Nuo was the only son of Isin's deceased older sister, but even so, he shouldn't let a relative take advantage of him so easily.

Malla's thoughts were apparently running the same way. "What about the other three hundred dien you borrowed last month?" she asked, crossing her arms.

“I’m going to pay it all back together at the same time,” Nuo insisted. He slid Isin’s assistant a petulant glare. “Who’re you to take an arrogant tone with me, anyway? If Isin hadn’t helped *you* out, you’d be barefoot with some filthy kids clinging to your skirt in a muddy village somewhere, wouldn’t you?”

Malla’s mouth fell open and she shrank back. Pulo took a step toward Nuo, inclined to punch him in the face, but Isin pounded the side of his fist on the counter in uncharacteristic vexation. “Enough! All of you. We depend on each other, either because we’re family, or because we share this shop. We shouldn’t turn on each other.” Isin sighed sadly as he handed over the loan. “Nuo, the gods only give us one life. We should use our time wisely, to commit worthwhile deeds, not selfish ones.”

Nuo frowned as he took the cash. Isin wasn’t usually the type to judge or lecture, or even to question. An expression of guilt and uncertainty crossed Nuo’s face but was gone a second later. “Yeah, sure,” he mumbled, as he stuffed the bills into his jacket pocket. “Listen, I’m going through a rough patch right now, but things are going to get better. Sorry for what I said, Malla,” he mumbled, scowling at Pulo instead of looking at her.

Nuo’s life, according to what Pulo had heard from Malla, had been a series of starts and failures. His father was a member of middling rank in the No Peak clan, so at the age of ten, Nuo had been sent to Kaul Dushuron Academy, one of the best martial schools in the country, but he’d been forced to drop out after two years. He was too sensitive to jade, as overreactive as a foreigner, and would get violently ill at school. Nuo’s parents had split up shortly thereafter (partly because his father was convinced Nuo wasn’t his child) and he’d been raised by his mother, who’d passed away two years ago. Nevertheless, Nuo had somehow managed to build up enough jade tolerance through private training to earn one small jade stud, which he wore through his right eyebrow, but that was likely all

he would ever wear. Isin and others might pity Nuo and forgive his shortcomings of character, but Pulo didn't.

"Eight hundred dien by next Fourthday, don't forget," Isin called after his nephew as Nuo left the shop, the door clanging shut behind him.

"Why do you put up with him?" Pulo demanded of his master. "Do you know what I think Nuo does with the money you give him? I think he spends it on drugs. I'm serious, Isin-jen. Why else would he be broke all the time?"

Isin took the wrapped moon blade out from under the counter. "If that's the case, it's better that Nuo takes my money than someone else's."

Malla's forehead creased with worry. "Do you really think he's gotten involved in something awful?"

"Last week, he asked me to give him a ride to the subway station," Pulo told them. "He seemed unusually nervous, so on a hunch, I parked nearby and watched him. Instead of going into the station, he went into the semibasement of a boarded-up building. What in the name of the gods was he up to? At this rate, he's going to end up dead or in jail."

Isin spoke over his shoulder as he took the wrapped moon blade with him into the back room. "Come with me," he said to Pulo. "I'll need your help with this repair."

Isin didn't really need Pulo's help. Working on Ayt Mada's blade was too important a job for anyone else. However, the jade setter motioned for his apprentice to sit next to him and observe and hand him tools, which Pulo did resentfully but dutifully, muttering an affirmative whenever Isin asked if he was paying attention.

Watching Isin work was like witnessing a courtly tea ceremony from some bygone era. Every part of the experience was quiet, precise, and laden with esoteric meaning. First, he would examine the jade, sometimes for so long it seemed he was communicating with it directly, or shaping it a hundred different ways in his mind before committing to action. While Isin

worked, he didn't play the radio, engage in conversation, or allow himself to be interrupted, even by customers. Many jade setters, unless they were Abukei or stone-eyes with natural immunity to jade, wore lead-lined gloves when they worked, to reduce their long-term exposure, but Isin did not. He insisted on feeling the jade, connecting with it as if it were his own trophy, won with blood, so he might best carve it into its most suitable final form. It was why Isin wore almost no jade of his own—only a single plain green band around his left thumb—so as to maximize his sensitivity and capacity to handle the jade of others.

After a long period of silent concentration, Isin tested that the pommel was now secure, then held up the moon blade to check its balance. He gave a single nod of satisfaction and began polishing the undamaged hilt with a fresh cloth, making the jade gleam brilliant and translucent green. He began speaking to Pulo as if there had been no break in their earlier conversation. "If only Nuo wasn't so sensitive to jade, he could work in the shop with us," the jade setter said regretfully. "He doesn't have the temperament to be a jade setter, but he could stand behind the counter or manage records. But even that would be too much jade exposure for him. I'm the only uncle Nuo has, but I can't offer him much."

"You're not responsible for Nuo's choices in life," Pulo pointed out.

"I know he doesn't have good judgment, but even if I can't change him, at least I can give him the chance to change himself. And if things end badly, then I'd rather know than not know."

"It's not my place to talk critically about your family, Isin-jen," Pulo said, trying to sound respectful while containing his annoyance, "but I've been your apprentice for years, and the reality is that Nuo's problems could hurt the shop. If you're going to bring me into the business, we ought to start talking frankly about all the things that affect it. We should be making decisions about the future together—you, me, and Malla."

The workroom had no windows, but Pulo knew the hour was late because he heard Malla closing up—putting all the display items into cabinets, dead-bolting the entry doors, turning the lights out in the front of the shop. Isin carefully wrapped the repaired moon blade back into the black cloth and placed it into the safe where customers' valuable items were stored overnight. He shut the steel door and spun the combination lock.

“You’re asking me to bring you into the business, but do you want to be brought in?” The jade setter turned back to Pulo with bushy eyebrows drawn together over his perpetually squinting, blinking eyes. “You have all the skills to follow in my footsteps if you choose. But a jade setter’s life is dedicated to uncelebrated work that might be undone. Every day, we give ourselves to the craft of setting jade that will give power to others. They do with it what they will, and we keep none of it for ourselves. That’s our place. Do you want that?”



WHEN HE RETURNED to his one-bedroom apartment that evening, Pulo sat in front of the television, eating a boxed takeout meal of barbecue chicken, and not really watching the show. During the next commercial break, he muted the TV and took a business card out of his wallet. He spent a long minute turning the card in his hands before he picked up the phone and dialed the number. The call picked up on the second ring.

“I’ve thought about it,” he said. “I’d like to start the process.”

“An excellent decision,” said the patronage counselor. “What changed your mind?”

A pang of guilt made Pulo hesitate. “I guess...I realized there’s no reason to hold myself back. And the best way to get ahead is with the backing of a big clan.”

He should've told Isin that he was considering striking out on his own. But perhaps it didn't need to be said. Surely, after the arguments they'd had about the direction of the shop, his master wouldn't be surprised. He would accept Pulo's decision the way he accepted his work changing hands. For some reason, the thought made Pulo feel worse.

"I'm delighted you're ready to pursue your future success. Let me get some basic information from you," said the counselor. Pulo could hear her shuffling papers. "Are you or any of your family members currently of rank in a clan, or do you have any special standing?"

"My aunt is an elder of Haedo Shield," Pulo said.

"But none of your relatives are tribute-paying Lantern Men?"

"No." *If they were, I probably wouldn't need you, would I?* Patronage counselors were for people who didn't already have an inside track to getting appointments and favorable notice by clan business leaders.

"Are you married? Do you have children?"

Malla appeared in Pulo's mind, unbidden. He couldn't pinpoint when he'd begun feeling the urge to stand closer to her, to find excuses to do tasks together, to say things that might make her smile. Sometimes, when she looked at him for a second or two longer than necessary, he imagined that perhaps she felt the same way, and it warmed him from head to toe. He thought of the way Malla bit her lip when she was bent in concentration over her careful work, the reflection of the bright work lamps off her copper skin, how she covered her mouth when she laughed. Malla was quiet in a way that suggested she had secrets to tell. They'd seen each other every day for years, and yet he still knew so little about her.

He knew it was because he hadn't tried to get close, not really. The idea of bringing an Abukei woman home to his parents was terrifying to contemplate. Racial prejudice notwithstanding, any children they had together would likely be stone-eyes. Although Pulo couldn't be a true Green

Bone warrior, was he willing to shut that valuable door of opportunity on his own descendants, trading it instead for society's disdain?

"No," he told the patronage counselor. "No wife or kids."

After some more questioning, the counselor said cheerfully, "Even without any family status in a major clan, I think your chances are very good. A Green Bone with four years of apprenticeship under a master jade setter is rare. We'll assemble a strong patronage request to present you and your business goals as favorably as possible. Which clan do you want to approach first? If one turns us down, we can try the other, but do you have a preference?"

Pulo said, "Does it matter? I don't know how I would decide."

"Of course it matters," said the counselor. "The clans control different districts, so you ought to think about where you want to locate your shop. The Mountain clan is larger, but the No Peak clan is growing faster. Both recently had new Pillars take over the leadership, which could be good for you, since they'll likely be interested in acquiring new Lantern Men. They're stronger in different industries, and accordingly have different tribute rates. You should talk to some Lantern Men in both clans and see what their experience has been. Most importantly, swearing allegiance to one of the major clans is a binding decision on your family. Do you hope to have sons who'll go to one of the big martial academies and become Fingers, or even Fists someday? There're a lot of considerations that affect the future."

Pulo grimaced and rubbed his brow. "Okay. I'll think about it."

Setting his sights on the future had only delivered disappointment to Pulo thus far. As a boy, he'd wanted to be a jade warrior—first like the ones he saw in movies, fighting criminals and foreign invaders, and later, like the fearsome clan Fists that everyone saluted on the streets. That childhood ambition had crumbled after he learned that Green Bones of Haedo Shield were more akin to glorified security guards. Nevertheless, he grudgingly

accepted that even if he couldn't become as famous and important as the top warriors of the Mountain and No Peak, being a Shieldbearer like his father was still a noble occupation.

Yet throughout Pulo's martial schooling, he struggled with the jade disciplines. He worked harder than his classmates, and his academic and physical scores were strong, so it wasn't that he was stupid, weak, or unmotivated. When he was fourteen, his teacher sent him for an evaluation, where he was diagnosed as underreactive. Although he possessed ample physical tolerance to jade, he suffered from a minor deficiency in his ability to manipulate jade energy. Despite remedial training and tutors, upon graduation, Pulo's Strength and Lightness were average, his Steel and Perception were barely acceptable, and his grades in Deflection and Channeling were poor. He earned enough jade to graduate as a Green Bone, but he didn't meet the standards required by the clan to become a Shieldbearer.

Pulo's parents weren't too upset. Of Pulo's two older brothers, one was already a Shieldbearer, and the other a teacher. "At least you're not a stone-eye," his family had said, as if that would comfort a teenager whose dreams had been crushed.

Reacting to Pulo's silence on the phone, the counselor said encouragingly, "Don't be daunted. If you don't receive patronage from the Mountain or No Peak, there are minor clans in other cities to fall back on if you're willing to relocate, although of course we'll shoot for the top and hope you get everything you want."



PULO WAS asleep when the phone rang in the middle of the night. He fumbled for the receiver in the dark, too groggy to even wonder who could be calling at this hour. What he heard at first was incomprehensible. The

voice on the line was crying too hard for the choked words to make any sense.

“Malla?” Pulo sat up straight, completely awake. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m...I’m in the shop,” she managed. “I’m in a lot of trouble.”

“Is Isin there?” No answer beyond a soft sob. “Malla?” Pulo’s heart began to pound in fear. The receiver shook in his hand. “Wait there, I’m on my way.”

Pulo hung up and ran, shoving his bare feet into shoes as he banged through the door of his apartment and down the stairs. The shop was only two subway stops away from his place in Sotto Village, but the train wasn’t going to be running frequently right now. Pulo mustered all the jade energy he possessed and ran the entire sixteen city blocks. Strength and Lightness turned him into a blur as he dodged late-night clubgoers staggering down the sidewalks, leapt obstacles, and elicited honks and profanities from cab drivers as he sprinted across intersections.

He was sweaty and breathless and clutching the pain in his side when he saw Isin’s shop. Pulo stumbled to a halt, his empty stomach turning to water. Two Janloon city police cars were parked in front, the red strobing of their lights reflected in the windowpanes.

As he ran toward the patrol cars, to his horror he saw an officer leading Malla out in handcuffs. Her shoulders were trembling and her head bowed as he opened the rear door of the car and pushed her into the back seat.

“Malla!” Pulo’s voice was raspy and dry from running. She looked up at him with tearful eyes and opened her mouth before the policeman closed the door and the tinted windows shut her from sight.

“What’s happened?” Pulo shouted. “Why are you taking her?”

The officer who’d put Malla into the car turned to Pulo. He was a heavy, middle-aged man with a trim mustache and deep-set eyes. “Who are you?”

“I work in the shop,” Pulo gasped, bent over. “I’m Pulo Oritono, the jade setter’s apprentice. Please, someone tell me what’s going on.”

The cop regarded Pulo with narrowed eyes. Then he jerked his head toward the shop. “Your neighbors, the owners of the all-hours spa, phoned in a burglary in progress. They said they heard noises outside, right before the alarm went off. You’d better come with me and tell me what was stolen.” He led the way around the back of the building.

Pulo followed in a haze of disbelief. It seemed the ground had disintegrated from under his feet and he were walking on air over a chasm. He already knew what he would see before the police officer stepped through the open rear door of the shop and played his flashlight over the scene. The steel safe where Isin kept customers’ valuables overnight was open and empty. The Pillar’s moon blade was gone.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE THEFT

ISIN ARRIVED AT THE SCENE FIVE MINUTES LATER, FLUSHED AND disheveled, in a white T-shirt and pajama bottoms, brown loafers over his bare feet. Pulo was sitting on the floor in a stunned daze. In the four years he'd worked in the shop, there had been only one robbery attempt, by a vagrant so high on opioids that he'd walked in and tried to hold up Isin with a butcher knife while two Green Bone customers from the No Peak clan had been browsing ring settings. Isin and Pulo hadn't had to do anything. One of the customers took the man's knife; the other snapped his neck.

The Kekonese consider theft to be the most despicable of crimes. Offenses such as embezzling money or hijacking a car carry severe legal penalties, but jade is the concern of the Green Bone clans, and stealing it would be asking for death. Isin's shop had steel bolted doors, an alarm, barred windows, and combination safes, but the real deterrent to burglary was the fact that despite being a non-tribute-paying property in the neutral Temple District, Isin's business was a common good that was de facto protected by every Green Bone clan. Who would be so reckless, so devoid of both morality and sense, to dare steal the moon blade of Ayt Madashi?

"Malla didn't do it," Pulo insisted again.

The police officer, who'd given his name as Detective Tan Takomon, stood over Pulo and lit a cigarette. "It wasn't a break-in," he pointed out. "The doors and windows are intact. The safe was opened and emptied, but

nothing else in the store has been damaged or taken. Even the cash in the locked register is still there. This was an inside job.”

In addition to the moon blade, there had been a few other small jade items in the safe—the watch with the cracked face, a couple of rings—all of it gone. The detective asked the obvious question. “What kind of thief could take that much jade? Whoever did it would give off an untrained jade aura like a shrieking fire alarm if he passed within Perception range of any Green Bone. But I’ve been on the radio the whole night and no one’s seen any unusual activity from the clans.”

Pulo wanted to scream. He knew exactly what the detective was thinking. Only someone who was nonreactive to jade, who wouldn’t give off any jade aura no matter how much they handled, could pull off a theft like this. It was why the Kekonese viewed the entire Abukei race with suspicion.

Pulo stood, fists balled. “If Malla did it,” he ground out through a tight jaw, “then why would the neighbors report any disturbance? Why would the alarm go off at all?”

Detective Tan nodded thoughtfully at Pulo’s question, unmoved by the anger behind it. “That part’s confusing. It seems your friend set off the alarm herself. When we arrived, we discovered her just sitting in the shop. Right over there, by the phone. She hasn’t said a word since we found her.”

Pulo’s mind raced in hurt confusion. He hadn’t heard the burglar alarm in the background of Malla’s phone call. She’d called him in distress, but after he’d hung up and promised he was on his way, she’d set off the alarm, notifying the police and getting herself arrested. *Why?* Why hadn’t she waited for him?

“So where’s the jade, then?” Pulo demanded. “Are you saying she stole it, left to hide it somewhere, then came *back* to the scene of the crime to carelessly frame herself for a burglary by setting off the alarm and waiting? That doesn’t make any sense at all!”

“Just because it’s baffling doesn’t mean it’s untrue,” said Tan. “Another possibility is that she passed the jade on to one or more accomplices, and for some reason is taking the blame.” The policeman rubbed his mustache with his thumb and settled a slow, meaningful gaze on Isin. “We don’t know what happened here, and Malla’s not telling us.”

Isin was slumped in the workroom chair where he’d been repairing the precious moon blade not so many hours ago. He seemed to have recovered a little from the initial shock, but his callused fingers were white as he held his hands tightly together in his lap, his knees pressed together and shoulders hunched. The jade setter raised his head slowly as if coming out of a stupor. “Tako,” he said, surprising Pulo by addressing the detective so personally. His voice was soft, almost inaudible. “We’ve known each other for a long time. Please believe me when I say Malla isn’t the one behind this. I’d swear it on all the jade I’ve ever touched.”

Detective Tan gave the jade setter a long, unexpectedly sympathetic look and stubbed out his cigarette in the workroom’s ashtray. “If you suspect someone else, Isin-jen, now would be the time to say.”

Nuo did it! Nuo was the only other person who’d seen the moon blade yesterday afternoon. He’d known at once how valuable and irreplaceable the weapon was. Pulo had seen the greedy glint in his eyes. It was difficult to imagine how the man could stoop so low as to steal jade from his own uncle’s shop, but Nuo was always hard up on money. If he was an addict like Pulo suspected, he could’ve been high on drugs, desperate and not thinking straight, like that foolish vagrant who’d tried to rob Isin years ago.

Nuo was around the shop often enough that he would know about the security. He might’ve taken a set of keys when they weren’t looking and made copies. Perhaps he’d spied out the combination for the safe. The one thing that gave Pulo doubt was that Nuo was too sensitive to jade to steal any amount of it and get far. He’d end up making himself sick and coming down with the Itches—if his uncontrolled aura wasn’t detected by Green

Bones first, as Detective Tan had pointed out. Had Isin's worthless nephew recruited jade-tolerant friends to help him? In any case, Nuo *had* to be the real thief.

Pulo opened his mouth to declare this to Detective Tan, but Isin caught his eye with an unusually sharp glare. The jade setter's lips were set in a thin, tight line. He gave a single, barely perceptible shake of his head. *Don't say anything.*

Pulo was astonished. Was Isin still trying to protect Nuo, even after what he'd done? While Malla, who'd worked for him faithfully for so many years and never received any public credit for her skills, sat in a jail cell? Obviously, Malla wasn't talking because she *knew* Nuo was the thief but was too loyal to Isin to send the police after his nephew for such a heinous crime. *Isin* had to be the one to offer up Nuo's name. Pulo blurted, "Isin-jen —"

"Your hands are bound, aren't they, Tako?" Isin ignored his apprentice's outburst, speaking only to the detective. The jade setter's voice carried a grim, subdued edge that Pulo found disquieting. When the policeman didn't reply immediately, Isin said, "The Mountain clan is bound to learn their Pillar's moon blade was stolen. This is going to be a clan affair."

Pulo's mouth closed as his master's words sunk in. The Janloon police dealt with the typical sort of offenses committed by and against jadeless civilians. Detective Tan, like most policemen, wasn't a Green Bone, and would be no match for someone with jade abilities. The clans policed their own. They ruled over everything that involved jade. When it came to jade theft or smuggling, the police would pass all information to the Horn and his Fists.

If Isin pointed the finger at his nephew, the detective would be obligated to inform Gont Asch, who would send the word out to his men. Nuo would likely be dead by the end of the day. Pulo could see in the jade setter's

desolate expression that even if Nuo was guilty, Isin wasn't ready to sign his death warrant.

Detective Tan hissed out an audible breath through his nose. He looked between Isin and Pulo with narrowed eyes. The policeman wore no jade and had no sense of Perception, but a career in law enforcement had made him skilled at reading people nevertheless. He could sense there were things they weren't telling him. "At least answer one question," Tako said slowly. "Do you believe your assistant was coerced or manipulated to take part in the crime, by someone else with a motive or grudge?"

Isin's face was as blank as marble as he met the policeman's gaze. "Even if that were the case, what could you do about it, Detective?" Some resentful understanding seemed to pass between the two men. Pulo's master dropped his gaze to his hands and twisted the jade ring on his left thumb. "Once the big clans move, they're like trains that're too fast and heavy to be stopped. People like us can only get out of the way."

Detective Tan frowned, his dissatisfaction palpable in the stuffy room. "Isin-jen," he said, "even though compassion is said to be one of the Divine Virtues, the world has a way of punishing people who step out of line. I hope you're not—"

The radio clipped to the detective's waist crackled to life with a blare of static. He picked it up, stepping outside into the alley behind the shop to speak to the person on the other end.

Pulo paced the room, his anxious thoughts churning. What would happen when the Mountain learned that Ayt Mada's moon blade had been stolen out of Isin's safe, seemingly by his own Abukei assistant? At the very least, the shop's reputation would be ruined. Isin would go from being the most renowned jade setter in Janloon to being a disgraced pariah that no one would trust their jade to again. Pulo could kiss the prestige of his four-year apprenticeship goodbye, along with any chances of starting his own business with patronage from one of the top Green Bone clans.

And what would happen to Malla? His chest clenched.

Detective Tan came back into the shop. Isin hadn't moved at all from his chair. *How can he be so calm?* Pulo wondered angrily. *Doesn't he know this could be the end of all of our careers, if not our lives?*

"We've searched your assistant's apartment," Tan said. "Nothing."

Pulo couldn't stand it anymore. "Of course there was nothing. She didn't steal the jade!" He rounded on the detective. "Let me talk to Malla. We could ask a Green Bone with skilled Perception—someone else from Haedo Shield, maybe; I could ask my aunt—to listen to what she has to say and judge if she's telling the truth. At least let her clear her name."

"She's an accomplice to jade theft at the minimum," said Detective Tan. "Even if she didn't take the jade for herself, we have every reason to assume she helped whoever did."

"How long will you hold her?" Isin asked.

"We have to charge her with a crime within seventy-two hours. Otherwise, we have to release her." Detective Tan paused, letting the implication sink in. The penalty for jade theft was death. Even if Malla was released without being charged by the police, she might still be assumed guilty by the Mountain and executed by its Green Bones. Or perhaps the real jade thief would murder her to keep her quiet first.

"I suggest if you have any information that will help us find the stolen moon blade within three days, you share it very soon. Or you can stay quiet and pray to the gods." Detective Tan gave them both a final, knowing stare before he turned away and stepped out of the shop. Outside, the sky was lightening with dawn, and the noise of the city began to rise like a dependable tide as shopkeepers, street hawkers, and office workers began their day. The detective spoke over his shoulder. "Either way. Seventy-two hours."



CHAPTER THREE

THE ULTIMATUM

WHEN THE POLICE WERE GONE, ISIN UNLOCKED THE FILING CABINET UNDER the desk and began to take out all the office supplies and random items in the top drawer: blank order pads, a stapler, pens, jeweler's tools, a pack of chewing tobacco, yellowed photographs of Isin as a much younger man standing with a pretty, smiling Abukei woman of about the same age.

"What are you doing?" Pulo demanded, bewildered.

When the drawer appeared to be empty, Isin removed the false bottom to reveal a hidden compartment that Pulo hadn't known existed. Pulo gaped. It was filled with jade, bundled stacks of cash, a talon knife and a revolver. Isin took out the revolver, loaded it, and tucked it into the back of his waistband. "I'm going to Nuo's apartment," the jade setter said grimly.

Pulo recovered from his shock. "I'm coming with you," he insisted.

"Someone needs to stay here and open the shop."

"*The shop?* In a few days, there won't *be* a shop if we don't find that moon blade. There's no way I'm letting you go after Nuo alone." If Nuo was far enough out of his mind as to commit such a heinous crime, who knew what other evil he was capable of? Isin wouldn't talk to the police, yet he was foolish and trusting enough to chase after Nuo himself, bringing only a revolver in self-defense? Pulo didn't always agree with his master,

but he'd be damned if he stayed behind and let the old man get himself killed.

Isin considered his apprentice's flushed, determined expression and apparently decided he couldn't prevent Pulo from following him. The closed sign remained posted in the shop window. They took a taxi to the Crossyards district, where Nuo lived in a ground-floor unit in a dense complex of low-rise apartment buildings. Pulo had never been to the man's residence before, and he looked around nervously as they approached the door.

Isin knocked. "Nuo, it's your uncle Isin. We need to talk. Open up."

No one answered. Pulo closed his eyes, summoning his modest sense of Perception and straining it beyond the door into the room beyond. Nothing. No shrill jade aura, no heartbeat.

Of course, it wouldn't be so easy. What had they expected? That a man who'd just marked himself for death would go back home to sleep and have breakfast as if nothing was wrong?

"We need to get inside," Pulo said. "Maybe we can find something that'll tell us where he went." Without waiting for Isin to agree, he mustered his Strength and yanked the door handle as hard as he could, ripping the metal casing from the wood so that it hung off bent screws.

To his chagrin, the door still wouldn't open; there was a dead bolt above the first lock. Trying to demolish the entrance further was sure to attract attention from neighbors. Pulo looked around for a window they could break into, but Isin took out a key and fitted it into the dead bolt lock. He turned it and pushed the damaged door open.

"Why didn't you say you had a key?" Pulo exclaimed.

"You didn't ask." Isin glanced at him chidingly. "How did you think we would get inside? Young people always believe jade abilities are the solution."

They stepped into the apartment and Isin closed the door behind them. The blinds were completely drawn, so the room was dim even in the morning, but it didn't take much light to see that the place was a mess. Nuo had apparently left in a hurry, and he hadn't been subtle or organized about it. Drawers were open and clothes strewn on the floor. The stale smell of old food emanated from takeout containers on the kitchenette counter.

There was no sign of the moon blade or the stolen jade but Pulo began to search anyway. He rummaged to the bottom of the dresser drawers, peered under the furniture, and looked in the cabinets and closets, feeling around the walls and floors for any hidden compartments. He didn't expect to find anything—no one, not even Nuo, would be stupid enough to incriminate themselves by hiding stolen jade in their own apartment—but he'd hoped for a miracle.

"Should we wait to see if he comes back?" he wondered.

Isin shook his head. He was going through the small stack of papers on the counter—junk mail flyers and unopened bills. "He's not coming back." The jade setter bent over and looked inside Nuo's garbage can. To Pulo's surprise, he picked up the plastic bin and tipped its contents out onto the floor. Food wrappers and crumpled paper spilled out, along with a small glass vial that rolled along the floor, and a used syringe.

Pulo crouched down and picked up the vial with a grimace. "I knew he was a drug addict," he muttered. "What do you suppose he was using?"

"Shine," Isin said, examining the rest of the garbage.

"The toxic stuff that's supposed to boost your jade tolerance?" Pulo had heard that foreigners had developed a drug to give themselves the ability to wear jade, just like the Kekonese, but without the years of training and gradual acclimation. Despite side effects that could drastically shorten a person's life, it was rumored that street versions were hitting Janloon, much to the disgust of Green Bones, who viewed it as a foreign vice and

unnatural chemical shortcut. But for someone who suffered from jade sensitivity...

Pulo's eyes widened and his hand closed tight around the empty vial. "Nuo juiced himself up with shine yesterday. That's why he could handle the moon blade and the rest of the jade in the safe without his aura going haywire from overexposure." He leapt to his feet. "We have to go back to Detective Tan and show this to him. This proves Nuo was the thief."

"No, it doesn't," Isin said. "Nuo didn't use to wear any jade, yet he was able to earn a little, and he's been training more than before. He might've been using shine for some time already. Just because he injected himself recently doesn't prove he committed the crime any more than someone buying a gun before a murder proves he was the murderer."

"You know he did it," Pulo exploded. "He was the only other person who saw Ayt's moon blade and could've gotten into the shop. And now we find an empty vial of shine in his apartment, so we know exactly how he was able to handle so much jade by himself."

The master jade setter remained kneeling on the floor amid the contents of the garbage can and didn't answer. Pulo paced around in front of him in agitation. "I know you don't want your nephew to be hurt or killed by the Mountain's Green Bones, but you have to draw the line *somewhere*, don't you? What about Malla? Are you going to sacrifice her and yourself and the shop to protect Nuo? We have to tell the police the truth."

Isin unfolded a crumpled piece of paper and studied it for long enough that Pulo leaned over to see what it was: a pay stub with a perforated edge where the check had been removed, in the amount of three thousand dien, from Amaric Best Personnel Ltd. It seemed Nuo had been truthful about one thing. He actually did have a job, and not a bad paying one.

Why, then, was he always broke? Why would he risk everything to commit a crime against his own uncle, one that carried the death penalty? Was it because of the drugs? Pulo was beyond caring at this point. Nothing

could excuse what Nuo had done. He simply wanted the man found and caught, the stolen moon blade returned, and Malla released.

Isin got to his feet slowly, brushing at the knees of his trousers and still holding the discarded pay stub. He folded it and put it into his pocket, then looked into Pulo's frustrated face. Isin blinked heavily and looked away, but not before Pulo saw the curtain of guilt falling over his face. "I know Nuo took the moon blade."

"Then why don't—"

"Because I'm sure someone else put him up to it." Isin's tone was one that Pulo had heard from him infrequently, and only when something truly upset him, like a ruined piece of jade he couldn't fix. Gruff and final, with a trembling, suppressed edge of helpless anger. "Nuo's not a bad person at heart. But it would be easy to take advantage of his greed and poor judgment. Even though there's probably no way for him to escape the consequences of his crime, I still hope there's a way to find the moon blade and return it without turning him over to the police or the clans."

Pulo fell into the only chair in the apartment and put his forehead in his hands. "Even if you're right and someone else planned the theft, we won't be able to find out who unless we find Nuo and get the truth out of him. By now, he's long gone, probably fled into No Peak territory." It would be too great a risk for Nuo to enter Mountain districts, where Ayt Mada's moon blade would be instantly recognizable. But there were plenty of places to hide in areas of the city controlled by the Mountain's rivals. Nuo might be thinking of selling the blade on the black market, or perhaps he hoped to curry favor with No Peak by offering them Ayt's weapon.

Isin put a hand on Pulo's shoulder. The rare gesture surprised Pulo. Isin was ordinarily a reserved man, spare with both praise and criticism, usually expressing his approval or disappointment with only silent looks. Now, grim vulnerability showed in his lined face. He looked at Pulo with a deeply apologetic expression.

“You’re a good apprentice,” he said unexpectedly. “You’re not to blame for any of this, and it’s not right that your reputation be tainted by a foolish and disgraced master.” He patted Pulo’s shoulder. His hand felt as heavy as lead. “If you haven’t already called a patronage counselor, you ought to do so right away. Break away before this news gets out and starts spreading. Even if my name becomes worthless with Haedo Shield and the Mountain clan, they’ll want to hide the embarrassing fact that Ayt’s moon blade was stolen. In the meantime, you can start your own business in No Peak territory. You have more than enough skills to do so, and No Peak would be lucky to have you as a Lantern Man.”

When Pulo had been deemed too weak in jade ability to become a Shieldbearer, his aunt Uma had unexpectedly stepped in with the proposal that he apprentice as a jade setter under Isin Nakokun. In contrast to his difficulty with the jade disciplines, Pulo had shown some talent in art and working with his hands. He could whittle tools from wood and shape objects from clay. Combined with his pointlessly high jade tolerance, becoming a jade setter seemed a perfect opportunity. Pulo’s parents readily agreed without consulting him.

On the first day of his apprenticeship, Isin had blinked at Pulo and looked around the shop as if wondering where in the limited space to put him. “I’ve never had an apprentice, and I’m not very good at explaining things,” the jade setter admitted bluntly. “So it’s up to you to watch carefully and figure things out for yourself if you want to learn.”

This is going to be miserable, Pulo had thought at the time.

But his first impressions had been wrong. Isin was indeed a man of few words, but he was also patient and dogged in the way that only a master craftsman could be. Even though Pulo suspected his aunt Uma and the leadership of Haedo Shield had prevailed upon Isin to take an apprentice with about as much room for negotiation as they’d given Pulo, which was to say, none, once Pulo was in the shop, Isin had accepted his presence as if

he'd always been there. How many hours had Pulo spent sitting next to Isin as he worked, observing him, handing him tools, waiting for the explanations of technique or the bits of jade-setting wisdom that would unexpectedly come out of complete silence?

Now guilt thickened his throat and he wasn't able to look Isin in the eyes. He couldn't bring himself to confess that he'd already decided to leave, that he'd talked to the patronage counselor about striking off on his own. But now it would be too cruel to abandon the old man. "What about you and Malla?"

Isin turned away. Inexplicably, he gathered the spilled garbage and put it back into the bin, as if he were considerately tidying for Nuo, who would likely never return. "Don't worry about us," he said. "We're survivors." He put the trash can back in its place and went to the door. "We should get back to the shop; people might be waiting."



GONT ASCH ARRIVED SHORTLY before closing time, accompanied by two of his men, different ones this time. Isin greeted him as calmly and respectfully as he had the previous day, displaying no sign at all that anything was wrong. "Gont-jen," said the jade setter, "I must beg forgiveness. One of my employees, who normally assists me in my work, is not here today due to unexpected personal circumstances. I'm ashamed to say the repairs on the Pillar's moon blade are not done yet."

Pulo stood well behind the counter, pretending to be reorganizing a display case and taking slow, even breaths. He was afraid his racing pulse would attract the Horn's Perception. Gont did not reply immediately. "That is disappointing to hear, Isin-jen." Gont's voice was low and amiable. He placed one large hand on the counter. "I hope your assistant has not suffered some grave misfortune?"

“Unfortunately, it is quite serious but of a private nature,” Isin replied. Pulo could tell that the jade setter was being careful not to lie. The most skilled Green Bones had such fine Perception that they could detect the subtle changes in a person’s body when they were being deceitful.

The Horn leaned forward onto his elbow, rippling the network of white scars across his huge shoulders. “In that case, I won’t pry as to whether it has anything to do with the police cars that were on this street last night. Or why the shop was closed this morning.”

Pulo fought to keep his hands steady as he closed up the display case. Of course, it was the Horn’s job to know what was happening on the streets. Even though they were not technically in clan territory, Gont’s spies and informers would’ve reported anything out of the ordinary.

Isin blinked at the Horn sheepishly. “The police responded to an alarm going off, which roused me out of bed and to the shop at a terrible hour, Gont-jen. Fortunately, as you can see, there was no damage to the shop, but as an old man, I don’t have the ability to brush off a night of lost sleep like I used to. And with my assistant not being able to work today, I wasn’t able to open up for business on time this morning.” Isin wrote out a new order form and handed the customer copy to Gont. “I’m grateful for your concern, and I would never dare give the Pillar anything less than my best work. Please let her know I require two more days.”

Sweat broke out on Pulo’s neck as he watched the exchange while trying not to appear as if he were watching. *If Gont asks to see the blade, we’re fucked.* If Isin had groveled in apology or shown fear, if he’d seemed nervous or defensive, the Horn would’ve been immediately suspicious. Perhaps he was still suspicious now, and debating whether to take the jade setter at his word. But Isin had spent decades dealing with Green Bone customers, and he knew how to speak to them, how to strike the right tone of deference while preserving his own expert standing.

Gont Asch took the form and straightened. “Of course, I understand that sometimes unavoidable delays arise, even for people with an impeccable reputation for being reliable.” The Horn’s deep voice was reasonable, almost gentle, entirely at odds with his intimidating physical presence. “I prefer to be forgiving toward small inconveniences, but the Pillar may feel differently when it comes to her most prized weapon.”

Gont tilted his chin down toward Isin. “I’ll do whatever the Pillar asks of me, since she honors me with her trust. But the Horn of the Mountain isn’t a messenger or an errand boy. I’ll pass on this bit of regrettable news to Ayt Madashi, and I’ll let her know that she can come to the shop in person in two days’ time to inspect the completed work on her moon blade for herself. That way, if there’s any further explanation required on your part, you can deliver it to her personally.”

The Horn of the Mountain and his Fists left the shop.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH

ISIN SAID NOTHING AS THEY CLOSED UP BUSINESS FOR THE DAY. PULO couldn't fathom what was going through his master's mind, how he could seem so calm as he reconciled the cash in the register and locked it up, then wiped down the glass display cases and counter fastidiously with a dustless cloth, as if there was nothing more pressing than the shop being spotless. Even now, he was a man who took pride in the smallest details and could never be rushed.

Pulo wondered about the photographs he'd glimpsed at the bottom of the jade setter's drawer. To his knowledge, Isin had never been married. He had no children. Pulo had never thought to question his master about it; he'd always simply assumed that Isin preferred to be alone. Besides, it was hard to imagine there were many women who wanted to marry a jade shop as much as a man.

Yet, he knew that Isin had spent many years learning jade-carving techniques from indigenous artists, living in remote villages for months at a time. Had Isin and the woman in the photos once been together? Had he left her behind? Did he save the pictures out of nostalgia, but keep them hidden away out of embarrassment? He'd never spoken of her. Then again, the jade setter didn't speak much about anything.

The idea that Isin might've had a secret relationship with an Abukei woman stirred a complicated sense of unease in Pulo. It forced him to think

of Malla in a way that filled him with empathetic shame. Was he any different from his master, staunchly concealing his feelings so he was free to walk away?

Isin had all but told him to leave and save himself before the Mountain found out the moon blade was gone and that Isin had lied to the Horn's face. Pulo could call the patronage counselor tonight to try to get the process sped up, to secure his own place in the No Peak clan and let Isin deal with the fallout. He felt a little sickened by how tempting the idea was. He could get out of this mess.

But Malla couldn't. She was in a jail cell. Even if she was released, where could she go? She had no family in Janloon, or any family at all, as far as Pulo knew. After Isin went down in disgrace, she would have no other job prospects. Pulo had heard of poor Abukei women coming to the city for the possibility of work and ending up missing, or living on the streets, or trapped in prostitution.

Pulo finished locking up the display cases. "What do we do now?"

Isin regarded him with concern. "You should go home and get some rest. You barely slept at all last night, and you look exhausted. I'll finish closing up."

Pulo thought, *You don't look so good either right now, old man.* Instead he said, "You heard what Gont said. We only have two days to find that moon blade. We don't know where Nuo is, and you won't ask the police for help. Do you have another plan?"

Isin stowed his bifocals into the small case he carried in his breast pocket. "I'm going to appear before the elders of Haedo Shield."

That surprised Pulo. Although he and Isin were members of Haedo Shield through family affiliation, neither of them held any rank in the clan, as they were not Shieldbearers. Isin obeyed the clan's strictures but had always maintained an arm's-length distance from the clan's leadership. Haedo Shield members were sworn to neutrality when it came to relations

with the other clans, and its elders were respected as neutral parties throughout the Green Bone community.

“Do you think they’ll help us?” Pulo asked, dubious but daring to hope. “Could they go to the Mountain and convince them not to hold us at fault?”

Isin answered with the blunt honesty with which he offered customer appraisals. “I doubt it.”

“I’ll come with you,” Pulo said.

The jade setter shook his head. “Go home. Your heart is in the right place, but there’s nothing else for you to do. We’ll see what happens tomorrow.”

Pulo opened his mouth to protest, but the granite expression on his master’s face made him close it again. At times during his apprenticeship, he would ask Isin why he insisted on doing something in a certain way instead of following the traditional methods of such-and-such other renowned master jade setter. Isin was a tolerant man, but when pressed too persistently, he would reply in a tone of brusque finality, “Because it works,” or “Because that is the way I do it,” followed by the admonition, “If you watched more carefully, you’d answer most of your questions before you needed to ask them.” Pulo could tell when Isin was done talking.

He did as Isin ordered and went home, stopping by a noodle stand for a quick dinner that he ate without enjoyment. Within minutes of walking in the door, the phone rang.

It was Detective Tan. “Pulo-jen,” said the detective. “I’m sorry to say we haven’t located either the thief or the moon blade that was stolen last night.”

Pulo was more surprised that Tan was calling him directly than by the fact that the police hadn’t made any progress. That didn’t stop a fresh weight of disappointment from leadening his limbs as he sagged onto the sofa. “Have you told Isin?”

“I wanted to talk to you first.” The detective let an unsubtle pause hang between them. “Last night, you were about to tell me something but didn’t feel comfortable speaking in front of your master. Now that we’re on the phone by ourselves, is there anything you want to say?”

Pulo hesitated. Although Isin seemed to know Detective Tan, he obviously didn’t want the police involved. “No,” Pulo said. “I...don’t know anything else.”

Several seconds of reproachful silence emanated from the other end of the line. “Maybe you can at least help me understand some new information that’s come to light,” Tan said. “After we searched Malla’s apartment, we interviewed her neighbors. One of them told us that Malla had a visitor early yesterday evening. The neighbor saw a young man standing outside of Malla’s door. Malla came out of her apartment and the two of them left together. The witness described the visitor as a young man wearing a denim jacket with a single jade stud above his right eye. We’re trying to find this person to question him. Does that description fit someone you know?”

Pulo had the distinct feeling that Detective Tan already knew the answer but was for some reason trying to force him to say it. “Maybe she has a boyfriend,” Pulo said, trying to sound offhanded and ignorant, but his face grew warm and his stomach lurched in disgust at the idea of Nuo and Malla together. He’d seen Nuo staring with undisguised interest at Malla before, which made him dislike Nuo even more. Nuo was an unreliable lout, a perpetual underachiever; he’d been rude to Malla earlier that very day. Malla would *never*... Would she?

When Pulo didn’t offer any further answer, Tan spooled out more bait. “I suspect the young man is Isin’s nephew, Nuo Donjunin. He might’ve been an accomplice to the theft. Or perhaps he could provide your friend with an alibi that would clear her name. Have you met him before? Do you know where he might be now?”

Pulo's pulse was thudding. He felt like a criminal himself, sitting under a bright light being interrogated. He considered spilling everything: telling the detective about Nuo's interest in the moon blade, his constant financial troubles, the empty vial of shine in his apartment's trash can. Surely that would be the right thing to do.

But Isin had seemed so adamant that someone else had influenced Nuo and there might be a way to get the moon blade back without condemning his nephew to death. Was Isin meeting with the elders of the Haedo Shield clan right now? Pulo owed it to the old man to give him cover, at least for another day. "I've met Nuo," he admitted. "But I don't know him, and I couldn't tell you where he is." That was all truthful.

Detective Tan gave a long sigh in Pulo's ear. "I'm not the enemy here. I don't want to see anyone killed. I want to help Isin, and you, and Malla. I can't do that without your cooperation." When Pulo remained silent, he said, "I'm going to give you my department line. Write this number down. Call and ask for me if you change your mind about talking."

After dutifully copying down the number on a slip of paper and stuffing it into his pocket, Pulo got off the phone with Tan and paced around his apartment for fifteen minutes, jittery and thinking furiously. The last thing he'd told the policeman was not accurate after all. He *did* have *one* idea of where Nuo might've gone.

Pulo collected his car—a secondhand compact Ryuna Swift—from the garage of his apartment building. He drove out to the subway station in the Crossyards, where a couple of weeks ago he'd dropped Nuo off as a favor and seen him walking into a semibasement.

Pulo parked a block away and sat in the car. The seemingly vacant building he was looking at was old and dilapidated, dating from before the Many Nations War and likely to soon be torn down and replaced with affordable housing units. He studied it, unsure of which door he'd seen Nuo enter. Pulo knew he was acting on a slim chance coming here, but slim was

better than none. If this was where Nuo came to buy or sell drugs, as Pulo suspected it was, then perhaps he would come here to hide or meet with accomplices.

Pulo watched for an hour, but no one entered or exited the building. The setting sun made the smog over the city glow orange as it dipped from view. The streetlights came on and traffic thinned. Another two hours passed during which Pulo cursed himself for being foolish while fighting the increasing urge to fall asleep.

Then it happened. He sat up so fast he banged his knee on the bottom of the steering wheel. In the gloom, he had to squint to make out the figure approaching the building, but he recognized Nuo's build and stride. Nuo was hurrying, but he seemed injured in a way that Pulo couldn't quite define, stumbling slightly, his movements jerky.

Pulo opened his glove compartment and took out a sheathed talon knife. He strapped it to his waist. It was an ordinary weapon that he kept for self-defense in case of an emergency, but now that he was faced with the possibility of using it, he wished he had a weapon with a jade hilt, or even a gun. At least Isin wasn't here. The old man didn't have it in him to turn Nuo in to the cops or the clans, much less fight him or hurt him if need be.

Pulo crossed the street and jogged toward the short flight of descending concrete steps that Nuo had taken. He approached the door nervously, wishing he had a stronger sense of Perception. Some powerful Green Bones could Perceive a person from hundreds of meters away, but all Pulo could sense was the faint and unpleasant texture of Nuo's jade aura somewhere inside. Ordinarily, he wouldn't be afraid of the man, but Nuo was a felon now and might be wearing a lot of stolen green.

Pulo tried the door handle. To his great surprise, it turned. Nuo had gone in without bothering to lock the door behind him. It didn't seem like the behavior of a fugitive who was afraid of being caught and killed by Green Bones. Pulo drew his talon knife and edged into the hall with his back

against one wall. The roar of blood in his head was so loud he felt as if he were standing inside a waterfall. The place was dark. Why hadn't Nuo turned on any lights? Did he know that he'd been followed?

Pulo's hands were sweating so much he was afraid he would drop the knife. He paused to wipe his clammy palms on his shirt. With a vertiginous climbing fear, he realized he was walking into a potentially violent situation in which he was at a clear disadvantage. His vaguely formed plan was to subdue Nuo and force him to confess what he'd done and who put him up to it. He needed to find out where the Pillar's moon blade was and whether it was still recoverable. But it wasn't as if Nuo was going to go along with that plan. Pulo wasn't a fighter or a detective. What if Nuo was armed? What if he was meeting with coconspirators? Anyone willing to steal that much jade was willing to kill.

The short hall opened into a large, windowless, concrete room. Pulo strained his Perception, sensing Nuo's jade aura, more high-pitched and spiky than ever, alone at the other end of the basement, but he couldn't see him. There were rectangular shapes in the bunker-like chamber that might've been crates or containers, lined up against the walls. A stale stench seemed to emanate from the bare concrete, permeating the cloyingly motionless and humid air: mold and urine.

He gave up on the pretense of stealth. "Nuo," he called, gratified that his voice rang out steady and angry in the enclosed space. "I know what you did. Malla's in jail because of you. But your softhearted fool of an uncle still wants to protect you. We haven't told anyone. None of the clans know, okay? Let's talk."

Pulo could make out the motion of a dark shape shifting at the other end of the room. He raised his tightly clenched talon knife in front of him, but Nuo didn't advance. Instead, he made an inarticulate noise that sounded like a cross between a moan and a laugh.

“Nuo?” Uncertain dread began to swim through Pulo’s guts. *Is he high on drugs right now?*

“There’s no one here.” Nuo’s voice was barely recognizable—dry and pained, and plaintive with confusion. “I need more. More shine. This wasn’t supposed to fucking happen.”

Pulo strained to see in the dark. Without turning or lowering the talon knife, he reached back with his left hand and felt around the wall, searching for a light switch. “Nuo,” he said, with the voice he might use to talk down a snarling dog. “We can still fix this. You don’t want to be a thief. Just tell me where the moon blade is.”

Pulo’s fingers found the switch near the door; he flipped it. A strip of yellow florescent light buzzed to life overhead. Pulo blinked at the harsh and sudden illumination. He stumbled back with a gasp of horror.

The room contained half a dozen empty cages. Each one was barely tall enough for a person to stand up in if they hunched over. Some of the cages contained dirty blankets. Nuo was huddled inside one of them, his back against the bars, his legs drawn up to his chest. He was still in the same T-shirt and black cargo shorts that Pulo had last seen him in, but he’d taken off his denim jacket and pulled it over his head, like a child hiding under bedcovers. Even when the lights came on, he didn’t seem to see Pulo at first. His eyes were bloodshot and unfocused; his mouth was open and he was panting, as if he were thirsty and hot from sitting in the sun. Nuo’s long arms were draped over his knees. At first, Pulo thought the man had been attacked by a savage animal. There were numerous bite marks on his arms and his fingers were streaked with dried blood. Worst of all were his legs. His calves were gouged and inflamed, weeping with pink moisture. They had been clawed and scratched so badly that it seemed much of the skin was gone.

“Gods,” Pulo breathed.

Nuo's gaze focused slowly. His lips pulled back in a grimace of rueful agony. "This is all Isin's fault. Why'd he have to piss off the wrong people? The shine was supposed to work. Ayt's moon blade was the perfect stroke of luck. Everything was supposed to be fixed. I was going to be rich..." A short sob broke Nuo's rambling.

"Nuo," Pulo said, slowly edging closer even though he wanted to turn and flee the room. "You need to go to a hospital. Maybe they can still help you." After the initial gruesome shock, he understood. The marks on Nuo's arms were from his own teeth. The wounds on his legs were self-inflicted. Nuo had taken shine to boost his jade tolerance so he could steal the valuables in the safe, but it hadn't been enough to protect him. Perhaps the drug had worn off, or been of low quality, or the jade exposure had simply been too great for someone like Nuo who didn't have enough training and natural tolerance, no matter what shortcuts he tried.

"No one can help me." Nuo scratched the raw flesh of his legs, bloodying his fingernails again. Pulo had to look away; he was inclined to agree. Such an acute and severe case of the Itches was almost always fatal.

"Where's the moon blade, Nuo?" He needed to get the information out of the sick man before he was overtaken by insanity and stopped making sense altogether. "I'll help you, but you need to tell me everything. What did you mean when you said it was Isin's fault?"

Nuo's chuckle carried an edge of madness. He closed his glazed eyes and rested his head on his knees, his tongue lolling out. "You just want to fuck that Abukei bitch."

Heat rushed into Pulo's face. He banged his fist on the bars of the open cage. "Malla's in jail because of you, you thieving piece of shit. Where's the fucking moon blade, Nuo?"

Nuo's eyes flew open, dancing with manic light. With horrifying suddenness, he rocked forward onto his feet and sprang, bloody hands reaching for Pulo's throat.

Pulo stumbled back, throwing his arms up. Nuo's jade aura spiked with murderous intent; the Perception of it stabbed Pulo's skull like the feedback shriek of a busted speaker. The man was on him in a second, frenzied and snarling, his mouth open like a zombie from a horror movie. In a panic, Pulo lashed out with the talon knife in his hand. It sliced through the fabric of Nuo's shirt and drew blood across his ribs, but the man didn't seem to notice at all. He was smaller than Pulo, but burning with the Itches and out of his mind. They crashed to the concrete floor.

Pulo hit the ground hard with his shoulder and hip. Nuo was on top of him, howling like a demon and trying to wrap his hands around Pulo's neck. "Get off me! Stop, *stop*," Pulo screamed. His talon knife arm was pinned by the weight of Nuo's knee on his bicep. Pulo heaved his body in desperation, dislodging the slighter man for long enough to yank his limb free. He slashed the talon knife across Nuo's weeping forearms.

Blood streamed between them onto Pulo's shirt and Nuo's shorts but Nuo seemed impervious to pain. He reached with both hands to grab Pulo's wrist, to wrench the weapon from his grip. Pulo grasped in a panic for the basic jade training he'd never used in a real fight. With a surge of Strength, he shoved the man in the chest with his free hand and followed up with a wild Deflection that lacked aim or power but nonetheless buffeted Nuo backward long enough for Pulo to pull free and scramble to his feet. Nuo lunged once more, like a rabid dog with a broken chain. Pulo didn't try to wound the man again. Screaming incoherently, he stabbed the talon knife into Nuo's neck.

Nuo jerked. For a fleeting second, the fog of insanity seemed to clear from his eyes. He looked down at Pulo's arm and then up into Pulo's face with an expression of wounded disbelief, as if to say, *Aw, keke, you didn't have to do that, did you?* A hiss escaped his lips, along with a trickle of blood. Pulo yanked his talon knife away and Nuo's throat opened like filleted meat. Hot droplets of the man's blood struck Pulo in the face; a

waterfall of red spread down Nuo's chest. He fell first to his knees, then onto his side. His eyes bulged; his mouth worked like the gills of a caught fish. He curled up and lay still.

With a moan of horror, Pulo retreated to the doorway and threw up chunks of mostly digested noodles swimming in milky broth. The smell of his own vomit mixed with the foul stench of the basement and the sharp metallic tang of blood made him gag again, this time on nothing but his own bile. For what felt like an hour but might've only been a few minutes, he crouched against the wall, shaking uncontrollably and still clutching the talon knife for dear life, eyeing Nuo's corpse as if it would come back to life and attack him again. When at last his breath steadied and his muscles unclenched, he slowly approached the body.

Pulo had never liked Nuo, but he wouldn't have wished a fate as horrible as the Itches on anyone, not even a jade thief who arguably deserved it. And he certainly hadn't wanted to kill the man. He'd never killed anyone—he'd never even come close. *Nuo was insane. He was going to kill you. He probably wanted to die. You did him a favor.* But even that litany of thoughts was not comforting, and it didn't ease his sense of guilty revulsion as he knelt next to the body, trying not to look at Nuo's staring face or the red maw of his rent throat.

With Nuo dead, he had no idea how to find the moon blade. Nor did he have any way of proving that Nuo had been the thief. Without any other culprit to pursue, Ayt Madashi would probably place the blame for her lost property squarely on Isin and his employees. The shop closing in disgrace and his own reputation being ruined was probably the best Pulo could hope for. Ayt Mada was a merciless Pillar. She'd ordered the death of her own brother; what might she do to them?

Pulo picked up Nuo's jacket lying where it had fallen on the ground. He felt around in the pockets, hoping to find some clue or some of the stolen jade that would link Nuo to the crime. In one pocket he found a rolled stack

of large denomination bills bound with an elastic band—easily several thousand dien—and a train ticket to the city of Toshon at the far southern end of the country. Nuo had been planning to flee, but he'd still been unable to outrun the consequences of being a jade thief.

Pulo left the building and stumbled back to his car. Adrenaline had overridden the pain of injury during his fight with Nuo, but his hip and shoulder were aching badly now. It felt wrong to leave a dead body behind, but he didn't know what else to do. Only when he put his hand into his pocket for his car keys did he remember the scrap of paper with Detective Tan's phone number on it.

There was a phone booth on the corner of the street. Pulo deposited enough coins to make a local call and punched in the number Tan had given him. The phone rang several times before the call picked up. "Detective Tan?" Pulo gasped.

"He's gone for the night," said an unfamiliar voice. It was nearly midnight. "This is the desk sergeant."

"Give Tan this address." Pulo read off the names on the intersection's street signs. "The semibasement of the empty building there—tell him that's where he'll find Nuo."

Pulo hung up on the officer and drove home in a stunned daze. When he staggered into his apartment, he spent thirty minutes in the shower scrubbing every inch of his body and trying to wash the stench of that horrible place from his nostrils. Afterward, he fell upon his bed and lost consciousness in an instant.



HE AWOKE WITH A PANICKED JERK, his heart pounding, still seeing Nuo's crazed expression and feeling the man's hands around his throat. Then he

realized it was midmorning and the shop would've been open for an hour already.

Rushing out the door, Pulo agonized over how he was going to explain what had happened, how to tell Isin that Nuo was dead and he'd been the one to kill him. When he reached the shop, however, the closed sign was still in the window and none of the lights were on. Bewildered, Pulo unlocked the door and walked into the back. "Isin-jen?" he called. No one answered. Everything was in its place, but Isin was nowhere to be found.

Worried now, Pulo used the phone at the counter to call Isin's home. In all four years Pulo had been his apprentice, the jade setter had never failed to open for business on time—with the exception of yesterday morning. The phone rang and rang but no one picked up.

Pulo hung up and sat in the shop by himself, head in his hands, unsure of what to do. Isin had said he was going to meet with the leaders of Haedo Shield. Had something happened to him last night? When Pulo raised his head, he saw a piece of paper taped to the top of the cash register: a note with two lines of the jade setter's meticulously neat handwriting.

I'm sorry to end your apprenticeship so abruptly. The shop is yours now, if you want it.

A plummeting sensation drained the warmth from Pulo's insides. He ran into the back room and yanked open the drawer with the false bottom. He dumped out the contents and opened the secret compartment he'd seen Isin access a mere twenty-four hours ago.

It was empty. Isin's personal jade, his stash of money, the revolver and talon knife were all gone. The old jade setter had fled and left Pulo alone.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE FISTS

TWO FINGERS OF THE NO PEAK CLAN WATCHED PULO APPROACH THE TALL iron gates of the estate. “What business do you have?” one of them asked.

Pulo touched his clasped hands to his forehead and bent into a respectful salute. “My name is Pulo Oritono. I’m the apprentice jade setter under Isin Nakokun of the Haedo Shield clan. I’m here to beg an audience with the Horn of No Peak.”

“Do you have an appointment?” the guard asked. When Pulo hesitated and shook his head, the Finger said, “The Horn is a busy man. If you want to see him, you have to go to one of the senior Fists and get permission first.”

The two Fingers were lower-rank Green Bones of the clan, but they both wore jade through their ears and around their wrists, and were well trained in how to use it. They would have no trouble keeping Pulo out.

“I understand the usual rules, but this is an emergency,” Pulo insisted. “Jade has been stolen out of my master’s shop.” The midday sun was high in the sky and a trickle of sweat ran down Pulo’s back between his shoulder blades. “Please, jens, I beg you to ask the Horn if he’ll see me right away.”

The two sentries exchanged a glance. Stolen jade was indeed serious enough that the Horn would want to know about it. One of the men shrugged and said, “Wait here.” He walked away onto the grounds.

Pulo waited with the other Finger, trying not to let his anxiety show. He wasn't sure he was making the right decision by seeking help from the No Peak clan, but he was out of options. Nuo was dead. Isin was gone. The moon blade was still missing. The events of last night had made it terrifyingly clear that he wasn't equipped to deal with this on his own, but he couldn't count on the police to protect him and Malla. The only people who could stand up to Green Bones were other Green Bones.

"So, you're a jade setter," said the remaining guard conversationally. "What's in style these days? The next piece of jade I earn, I'm thinking of getting an orbital piercing or a septum piercing. What do you suggest?"

Pulo's overstressed mind chugged slowly and painfully to process the mundane question. "Um. I would say any jade worn in the ear is more classic and conservative, if you want to work on the business side of the clan someday. Septum rings are a more aggressive look, popular with Fists and Fingers, but they go in and out of fashion."

The Finger nodded appreciatively and to Pulo's dismay looked as if he wanted to discuss the issue further, but fortunately the other guard returned. "The Horn is finishing up lunch with a Lantern Man, but he agrees to see you."

Pulo let out a breath of relief and followed the man through the gates. Despite the urgency of his visit, he couldn't help taking in the estate grounds with awe and curiosity as he was led up the long driveway onto a footpath that circled the main house. Kaul Seningtun, the patriarch of the No Peak clan, had recently retired as Pillar, passing the position to his eldest grandson, but he was still revered as a war hero and influential businessman. His residence was a stately two-story mansion with clean lines, a green tile roof, and dark wood paneling. The Finger brought Pulo into a wide courtyard, beyond which sprawled lawn and gardens, with manicured gravel paths that led to other houses and a private training hall.

At a patio table under the blooming cherry tree sat Rotan Teohan, the Horn of No Peak.

Rotan was a grizzled combat veteran, one of the Green Bone warriors who'd fought for and won Kekon's freedom during the Many Nations War a generation ago. Physically, he was the opposite of Gont Asch of the Mountain clan—gray-haired and lean as a wolf, his sharp, narrow eyes hooded by a prominent brow and long forehead. Chunky jade rings adorned each of his knobbly knuckled fingers and the large jade buckle on his belt was carved with a boar's head. Rotan was leisurely eating from a platter of thin-sliced meats and pickled vegetables, a folded newspaper on his lap, chatting with his lunch companion and watching half a dozen of his Green Bone warriors training on the lawn.

Pulo stopped in front of the table and steadied his nerves. "Rotan-jen," he said, clasping his hands and touching them to his forehead as he bent forward in a deep salute. "Thank you for seeing me right away, and forgive me for interrupting your meal."

Rotan glanced at Pulo with a faintly bored expression. He turned to the Lantern Man seated next to him. "Mr. Washo," he said, in regretful dismissal, "We'll have lunch again sometime soon, after I've spoken to the rest of the clan's leadership. Give my regards to your mother. She must be pleased to see you doing so well for yourself."

Washo. Pulo recognized the name, but couldn't immediately place it. The middle-aged man it belonged to possessed a clean-shaven square jaw and a thick head of hair, and was dressed in a perfectly pressed blue pinstripe linen suit with gold cuff links. He carried his wealth the way Green Bones carried their jade. "Rotan-jen, my mother would be happy to hear from an old friend, and I would be honored to have the clan's support during my campaign. Thank you for carrying my request to the Pillar." Washo dabbed his mouth with a napkin and pushed back in his chair, then

paused and regarded Pulo with unexpected interest. “Aren’t you the apprentice of Isin Nakokun, the jade setter?”

Pulo remembered all of a sudden: Washo Kunimun was a big-time Lantern Man in No Peak, a mover and shaker in Janloon social circles, frequently photographed, a well-connected and wealthy financier who owned several businesses. Pulo didn’t pay much attention to politics, but he’d seen Washo’s face in the newspapers, alongside the news that he’d declared an intention to run for an open seat in the Royal Council.

“I...ah, yes.” Pulo couldn’t imagine why this man would know who he was.

Washo laughed at Pulo’s bewilderment, showing bright white teeth. “You’re probably wondering how I know Isin, since I have no need for jade-setting services,” said the financier. “Well, I can recognize an underrated business when I see one. I offered to buy his shop years ago and expand it into a national chain. You won’t be surprised to hear that the stubborn old goat refused.” Washo shook his head, as if he couldn’t fathom why anyone would be so foolish as to turn him down. “Say, are you nearly finished with your apprenticeship? Are you planning to start your own jade-setting business?”

“I...don’t know,” Pulo answered awkwardly, wanting to kick himself. A mere two days ago, if a wealthy Lantern Man with connections to the top leadership of No Peak had shown an interest in his future plans, he would’ve been electrified by his incredible good fortune. Seeking clan patronage to start his own business had felt like a momentous step. Now it felt about as likely as going to the moon, and on a similar level of priority. All that mattered was finding the missing moon blade, returning it to the Mountain so they wouldn’t kill him, and getting Malla safely out of jail. “I haven’t...ah, given it much thought yet.”

Washo seemed amused, perhaps by how Pulo was coming off as even more socially maladroit than his master. “No rush, I suppose. Give your

master my regards, and be sure to tell him that if he ever changes his mind and decides it's finally time to retire, he knows where to find me." The businessman stood briskly and saluted the Horn. "Thank you again, Rotan-jen, and as always, may the gods shine favor on No Peak."

Washo departed. Pulo remained standing, not sure whether to sit down, since the Horn hadn't offered Washo's empty seat. Out on the lawn, the Fists were hurling Deflections and counter-Deflections so powerful that the grass waved violently as if in a storm and Pulo could feel the concussive vibrations in the air from dozens of meters away.

The Horn dipped a thin slice of pork belly into a tiny platter of chili sauce. "You told my Fingers that your master's business was targeted by jade thieves. Why does he send his apprentice instead of coming himself?"

"Rotan-jen, I don't know where he is," Pulo admitted. "He didn't come into the shop today and I can't find him. I think he's ashamed and afraid to tell anyone that the thief came from his own family." Pulo shoved aside the guilt of speaking badly of his own master. After all, Isin was the one who'd fled, leaving him in this mess.

Rotan finished chewing slowly. "You already know who committed the crime?"

"Isin's nephew. A man named Nuo Donjunin. I tracked him down yesterday, but he was out of his mind with the Itches." The awful memory made Pulo fight a whole body shudder. "He's...dead now."

Rotan shrugged, unsurprised by the world's natural consequences. "If the thief is dead, what more do you want?"

"The jade is still missing, Rotan-jen," Pulo said. "One of the items stolen was an especially valuable moon blade. Nuo might've had an accomplice. I think they sold it or hid it somewhere in No Peak territory."

Pulo began to sweat under Rotan's steady but uninterested gaze. He would've thought the Horn of No Peak, the military leader of the second-largest clan in the country, would react more strongly to the report of such a

severe crime, that he would be sympathetic to how the stain of it could ruin a small business owner. Then again, Rotan Teohan was rarely seen out on the streets of Janloon these days. He'd long been respected for his jade abilities and his effectiveness at keeping No Peak territories orderly and safe, but after Kaul Sen had stepped down as Pillar last year, rumors had begun that the Horn would also soon retire.

Pulo kept Malla's face in his mind as he lowered himself to his knees, fists clenched on his thighs, reminding himself that he'd come grudgingly prepared to plead. "Rotan-jen, I'm sure nothing within No Peak territory escapes the notice of your warriors and spies. My master's shop is renowned and has served Green Bones of every clan for twenty years. It'll be disgraced if the stolen jade isn't recovered and instead remains in the hands of criminals, or is maybe even smuggled out of Kekon." He kept his eyes on the courtyard's concrete pavers in front of his knees. "I can count only on your help."

Rotan blew out a breath of annoyance. "Stand up," he grumbled. "You're a loyal apprentice, I'll give you that much." The Horn raised his voice and shouted across the courtyard. "Hilo! Come over here."

One of the Fists on the lawn left the practice and sauntered over, wiping the sweat from his face with the hem of his shirt. When he reached the table, he poured the rest of the chilled tea from the pitcher into Rotan's used glass and drained it in a few gulps. "Are you sure you don't feel like melting with us in the sun, Rotan-jen?" he said with a smile.

"I have a job for you," said the Horn, not smiling back. He jerked his head toward Pulo. "See if you can get a lead on a stolen moon blade."

The Fist glanced at Pulo, then back at the Horn. "Sure," he said, then shrugged and began to walk away.

Pulo was astonished by the nonchalance of the man's behavior toward his own Horn. He was even more surprised that instead of taking offense, Rotan merely sighed and picked up his newspaper. Only when the Fist

glanced over his shoulder did Pulo realize he was expected to follow. He hurriedly caught up to the young man, who paused to motion to two of his friends on the lawn. They put down their sparring weapons and broke away from the group.

The Fist began walking again. Everything about him suggested he was a high-ranking Green Bone, so he must be older than Pulo, in his midtwenties at least, but he looked young enough to be in his teens. “What’s your name?” he asked Pulo.

“Pulo Oritono, jen. Apprentice to the jade setter Isin Nakokun.”

The man turned to Pulo with raised eyebrows. “Is that so? Isin Nako does good work. Put in every one of these for me.” He pointed to his collarbone, where a line of embedded jade studs gleamed like a permanent necklace.

The two other Fists who’d left the practice joined them as they reached the garage. “Where are we going, Hilo-jen?” the larger one asked.

“Looking for some stolen jade that might’ve been sold on the street.”

The slighter of the two men made a face. “Rotan could’ve sent anyone to do that, one of the senior Fingers, even. Old coot’s wasting our time.”

Their leader opened the trunk of a gleaming white Duchesse Priza with a silver grille. “He can send us to chase the whores off the street corners in Coinwash for all I care. He knows I’m taking his job, and he’s got a retirement villa waiting an ocean away in Marcucuo. So let him have his last couple months of bossing us around and then he’ll be gone.”

Pulo came to the realization suddenly and with the sharp embarrassment of a man who should’ve seen the obvious. The young Fist was Kaul Hiloshudon—second grandson of the patriarch, younger brother of the current Pillar. Pulo had heard his name spoken often enough by customers in the shop. Pulo hid the nervous chagrin on his face by touching his clasped hands to his forehead in salute. “Kaul-jen, thank you for helping me, even though it’s beneath you to do so.”

“Don’t let Tar’s attitude fool you. Nothing is beneath the three of us.” Kaul grinned at his friends and pointed to Pulo. “This is Pulo Ori, he’s going to be a jade setter. Pulo-jen, that’s Maik Kehn and Maik Tar.”

Pulo touched his forehead in greeting, surprised that Kaul had referred to him as a Green Bone despite the vast difference in status between them. The Maik brothers nodded to Pulo with cordial indifference.

The three Fists began stripping off their sweaty training clothes, tossing them into the trunk and putting on collared shirts and summer blazers, strapping on jade-hilted talon knives and holstering handguns with the effortlessness of men who did it every day. Pulo had a hard time imagining why they would need so much weaponry; each of the three Fists was already wearing more jade than Nuo had stolen out of the safe in the shop.

He thought about the simple talon knife he kept in his glove compartment and the way he’d clutched it when he’d gone into the basement last night. Even with the knife, he’d been scared. He’d been hurt, and he could’ve been killed. If any of these Fists had encountered Nuo, they could’ve restrained him with little effort, found out where he’d taken the moon blade, then snapped his spine. A week ago, Pulo would’ve envied these men. Now he felt gratitude that they were helping him, and also a faint revulsion. He hung back until they slammed the trunk and got into the car.

Kehn, the larger of the Maik brothers, drove with Kaul in the front passenger seat and Pulo sitting uneasily next to Tar. The Fingers at the front gate waved as they left the estate. Kaul rolled down his window, letting in the warm breeze. He drummed his fingers on the side of the car and glanced at Pulo in the rearview mirror. “When was the blade stolen?”

“Two nights ago, Kaul-jen,” Pulo said.

“What does it look like? Anything special about it?”

Pulo hesitated. A nervous sensation was crawling into his chest. “It’s a thirty-two-inch Da Tanori. The scabbard is red wood and carved with a

landscape of mountains and sea waves. The pommel is a carved jade tiger's head and the hilt is inlaid with four bands of jade, etched with the characters for the Divine Virtues."

Kaul spun around so fast that Pulo flinched back. The Fist leaned through the gap between the front seats, staring at Pulo intently. "Wait one fucking minute. Are you telling me that Ayt Mada's moon blade is *missing*?"

Pulo opened his mouth but no sound came out. He hadn't anticipated that Kaul would recognize the owner of the weapon from a description alone, but he shouldn't have been surprised. As Nuo had said, the most powerful and famous Green Bones had custom blades, and it made sense that someone like Kaul Hilo would pay attention to his family's rivals.

Pulo closed his mouth and nodded mutely.

Kaul kept staring for another second. Then his face split into a lopsided grin and he barked a laugh of delighted disbelief. The Maik brothers chuckled smugly with him. Maik Tar said to Pulo, with an unpleasant smirk, "No wonder you look so worried, kid. Ayt doesn't know you lost her moon blade yet, huh? Are you planning to cut off your ear?"

Pulo wanted to tell Tar to fuck off, but he suspected the Green Bone would break his arm. "I didn't lose it. It was stolen by a good-for-nothing shine user who came down with the Itches and tried to kill me." As much as he hated what Nuo had done, now that the man was dead, Pulo felt a twinge of irrational guilt for speaking badly of him to others. "It might be funny to you, but my whole livelihood and my friend's life is at stake."

The Duchesse Priza was rolling into downtown. Pulo noticed that other cars changed lanes or moved aside for it. Kaul smacked Maik Kehn on the arm. "Imagine if I walk into my brother's office with Ayt Mada's moon blade. You think he'd have a heart attack?" As his friend snorted in amusement at the idea, Kaul turned back around to Pulo, light dancing in his eyes. "Who else knows the moon blade was stolen?"

Pulo did not like where this conversation was going. A conspiratorial eagerness was starting to build between the three No Peak Green Bones. “The police know,” he told them quickly. “But they don’t know who did it. They locked up the wrong person for the crime. And Gont Asch. He suspects something.”

Maik Kehn said, “I’d sure like to see Gont have to eat shit for this.”

Pulo was sweating. He hadn’t considered that if the moon blade was found in No Peak territory, Kaul might not return it to the shop at all. Suddenly, seeking help from No Peak seemed like it might’ve been a terrible idea, akin to running away from a bear and straight to a tiger. “Kaul-jen, are you... You wouldn’t... You’re not thinking of...”

“Taking Ayt’s blade for myself if I find it? What do you think I am, a *thief*?” He growled the word as if it were a threat, then laughed at Pulo’s frightened silence. Kaul leaned back in his seat. “Let’s say I don’t know it’s Ayt’s blade. I just *happen* to confiscate something nice off the black market, like we’ve done at other times. So I walk around with it for a few days, until someone recognizes it and runs to the Mountain.”

Tar jumped on the scenario eagerly. “And then Ayt’s got to show up in front of your brother asking for her own moon blade back. Everyone thinks she’s such a tough bitch, but that’ll take the glow right off her.”

Kaul Hilo tapped his chin with his thumb, warming up even more to the possibilities. “We could drag the suspense out longer than that. Let a couple weeks go by while Gont sweats. Then we take the moon blade to Ayt ourselves. Walk right into her fucking house. Missing this, Ayt-jen? We found it for you! You’re welcome, but shouldn’t the Pillar of the Mountain be more careful?”

The Maik brothers roared with laughter. The air inside of the Duchesse felt as if it crackled with the excited energy of their jade auras. Pulo felt mildly nauseous. He was trying to make things right—to return stolen jade to its owner and free an innocent woman jailed for a crime she didn’t

commit. All these men cared about was the constant sparring for status, jade, and territory that would place them above their rivals. They relished the prospect of doing something daring that would get them noticed, that would allow the No Peak clan to spit in the Mountain's eye.

"Ayt Madashi is coming back to the shop tomorrow afternoon," Pulo blurted loudly above the merriment. "So whatever you're planning won't fool her. If she doesn't kill me, she'd see through any lie I try to tell."

Kaul abruptly stopped laughing. In a blunt, scolding tone that made Pulo flinch again, he said, "We're just having fun thinking about it; we haven't even found the moon blade yet. It might be long gone by now. We'll see what we can learn, but I'm doing this because the Horn told me to, and you seem like a good person, not because I expect Ayt Mada's blade is going to appear at my feet like a wink and a gift from the gods."

"I understand, Kaul-jen," Pulo mumbled.

"If you're worried Ayt will blame you and Isin, you could move into No Peak territory," Kaul said, with offhanded helpfulness, as if suggesting Pulo try a new diet for his own health. "At least you'd be safe from the Mountain. We could use a jade-setting shop on this side of town, in Sotto Village or Old Town, that would be great."

The Duchesse Priza turned off the main thoroughfare of the General's Ride onto the narrow streets of the Forge. Kehn drove slowly; the huge sedan barely fit between the cars parked on either side of the road. The north end of the district was old and poor; street vendors sold cheap goods from stalls overhung with plastic tarps, dogs sniffed around the gutters for scraps, and ramshackle tenement buildings crowded against each other and blocked out the sky.

"This is close enough. Double-park behind the van over there and stay with the car," Kaul said to Maik Kehn. "This shouldn't take too long."

The older Maik brother stopped the car where his boss had indicated. Kaul Hilo and the younger Maik got out. As soon as they emerged from the

Duchesse, several people passing on the street paused to touch their foreheads in wary salute.

For a second, Pulo considered staying safely inside the vehicle. Then he pushed open the door and hurried to follow. No matter what Kaul said, Pulo didn't trust these Fists not to take whatever they found to benefit themselves and their own clan and not care what happened to him and Malla. He realized with an apprehensive sinking feeling that he was powerless to stop them if they did, but at least he could go with them and see what happened.

The Fists walked down a side street and turned into an alleyway that smelled strongly of rotting vegetables, striding unerringly toward a destination they obviously knew. The No Peak Green Bones didn't look back or wait for Pulo, but they didn't shoo him away either, letting him follow at a bit of a distance, like a hopeful stray dog.

"Where are we going?" Pulo ventured to ask.

Kaul Hilo stopped in front of an unmarked metal door that hung slightly askew. "To search the trash," he said, and tore the door off its hinges.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE DEALER

“AH, FUCK!” PULO HEARD SOMEONE YELL. IT MIGHT’VE BEEN HIM, EXCEPT that it came from the room beyond where the door had been standing. Kaul and Maik dragged aside the buckled metal as if opening a tin can, then stepped inside, jade auras blazing with Strength.

Pulo recovered from his shock and followed them. They were in a narrow, windowless space that appeared to have been a single garage converted into a sparsely stocked secondhand weapons store. Moon blades and long guns were displayed on the wall. Two locked cabinets contained talon knives and handguns of varying condition and quality, next to two refrigerator-sized safes. Upon the violent entry of the uninvited Green Bones, a huge man with a pale, babyish face stumbled out of his seat and fumbled a revolver from his wide waistband.

Kaul hit him with a Deflection that, given the man’s size, didn’t knock him down entirely but did send him staggering backward and wheezing as if he’d been punched in the chest. He fell heavily back into his seat with a wide-eyed expression of fear and intense indignation. “Ah, fuck,” he repeated, this time with more resignation than surprise. He dropped the gun and raised his hands over his head as if to ward off another blow. The left hand was missing its ring and pinky finger.

“Three-Fingered Gee, you fat goat fucker,” said Kaul cheerfully.

“Why do you have to wreck my door, Kaul, every time,” Gee complained, hands still raised. “You can’t knock like a normal person?”

“That’s *Kaul-jen*, you worthless cur,” Maik Tar growled.

“Kaul-jen,” Gee repeated, his eyes darting between Kaul, Maik, and Pulo, whom he eyed with confusion, easily noticing that the latter wasn’t a clan Fist, and seemed nearly as frightened as he was. “I swear to the gods, whatever it is, I didn’t do it and I don’t know anything.”

“Don’t invoke the gods too soon. You don’t even know what I’m here for,” Kaul pointed out. “Maybe I’m bored and am here to finally kill you.” He strode up and kicked Gee’s chair against the wall, standing over the man with relaxed menace. “You’ve smuggled enough jade in No Peak territory that I could do it anytime and your own mother wouldn’t blink if I did. Do you know why you’re not feeding worms?”

“Because I tell you things, Kaul-jen,” Gee whimpered.

“I want to see everything that’s come in since Secondday night.”

Gee heaved himself to his feet reluctantly and went to one of the safes, hunching over to hide the combination as he opened the door. He took out two metal trays. One held several raw jade rocks, ranging from the size of a grape to that of a lemon. The other tray contained half a dozen small jade items—one earring without a mate, a lone cuff link, a watch with a cracked face, a couple of rings. The largest item was a talon knife with a rusted, nicked blade and a single thin stripe of jade down the back of the hilt.

Kaul gave the items a cursory look. “What else?” he demanded.

“That’s all,” Gee insisted. “Just river runoff and scavenge.”

“No one came in with a moon blade, a nice one?”

Three-Fingered Gee choked on a cough of incredulity. “You think I’d be sitting here if I had a stolen moon blade? I’d be hiding as far away as I could get from clan territory until I sold it for enough money to get out of the country for good.” Gee sniffed, eyes narrowing as his curiosity seemed to temporarily overcome his fear. “Whose moon blade was it?”

Pulo's heart sank. Gee was right. No one with a stolen Green Bone weapon that valuable would be stupid enough to stay in Janloon. If Nuo had sold the moon blade, whoever had bought it was probably gone by now.

Kaul Hilo shoved Gee back into his chair roughly without answering the man's question. "How about the other dealers? Tamo the Squid. Little Mr. Oh. That new guy in Paw-Paw. Heard anything, any rumors? Any of them suddenly gone quiet or made themselves hard to find? I know you dogs are always sniffing each other's asses, hoping to take a bite."

"No, I told you, nothing." Gee's eyes darted pleadingly to Maik and Pulo, as if hoping, inexplicably, for them to sympathize and intervene.

Maik, however, was walking around looking at the blades and guns on display, shaking his head. "What a bunch of junk," the Fist commented.

Pulo returned his gaze despondently to Gee's motley collection of items. Sucking in a sharp breath, he picked up the broken jade-faced wristwatch on the tray. He'd overlooked it at first, because he'd been single-mindedly hoping to find the missing moon blade. Jade energy tingled up his arm into his body just as the realization hit him like a brick. "Wait! This was from the shop. It was in the safe along with the moon blade." He remembered clearly now. Isin had examined the watch that day and told Malla to call the customer to explain that the crack was too deep to repair.

Shaking with excitement, Pulo picked up the rings. Both were freshly cleaned and polished, not scavenged items at all. "The rings, too. They were taken that same night." He hadn't spared any of the other stolen objects much thought. They were valuable but replaceable, the loss of them easily covered by insurance. No doubt Nuo had taken them as a mere afterthought simply because they were in the safe along with what he really wanted.

Pulo ran over to Kaul with the items. "The thief, Nuo—he was *here*."

Kaul reached down and seized Gee's thick left wrist in a grip of Strength that made the jade dealer cower in his faded desk chair. The Fist

pinched Gee's middle finger and wriggled it back and forth, as if testing its mobility. "Tar," he said, "come over here with your talon knife."

"Gods, no, *please!* I swear I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!" Gee wailed in panic as Maik came over and drew his knife. Pulo backed away, eyes wide. He wanted more than anyone to find out if Nuo had been here with the moon blade, but the sight of Gee wheezing with terror under the scrutiny of the two No Peak Green Bones made his stomach turn over.

"The man who sold you the watch and the rings," Kaul said, his voice not changing at all. "When was he here? What else did he bring you?"

"Nothing!" Gee's pale face was shiny with sweat. "He came in yesterday around noon. Skinny kid, denim jacket, black cargo shorts. One tiny jade stud in his eyebrow. Scared shitless, just wanted to get rid of the watch and rings for money. Didn't look very good, wasn't too steady on his feet. I don't ask questions, okay? I just bought what he had to sell and said, 'You better take yourself to a doctor, kid.'" The jade dealer's words tumbled over each other in a torrent. "If he had anything else, I didn't see it and he didn't show it to me."

"Had you seen him before? Any idea where he went?"

"No, never! I'd remember if I had. Sane people don't make a habit of coming around here. No clue where he went; it's not like we talked much. I see someone who looks like he's coming down with the Itches, I want to finish my business with them and get them out of here quick, you know?" His eyes darted back and forth between his immobilized finger and the talon knife in Maik Tar's hand. "For the love of the gods, you're Green Bones with a shitload of jade, you can Perceive that I'm telling the truth, can't you?"

Kaul considered the frightened jade dealer for such a long moment that Pulo had to fight the urge to squirm himself. At last, Kaul glanced at Maik

Tar with an unspoken order. Tar reluctantly sheathed his talon knife. Pulo let out a breath nearly as audible as that of Gee's relief.

"I can forgive you buying a bit of river rock from the Abukei," Kaul said, releasing Gee and pocketing the remaining contents of the tray—the earring, cuff link, and disused knife. "But if I find out you've been keeping anything from me, if you've been hiding or helping jade thieves and smugglers, you'll have to change your name to No Fingers Gee. I'm going to be the Horn soon, so I'll have to set a good example for everyone and not be lenient."

Gee's fear morphed into a scowl of resentment but he said nothing. Kaul walked to the broken doorway, then paused and turned around. He went back to Gee and placed the meager jade contraband back into the man's hand, as if he'd changed his mind in an abrupt fit of generosity and wished to part on good terms. Leaning over Gee, he added, in an almost friendly way, "If you do hear anything about a stolen moon blade, a custom Da Tanori that would be worth a lot of money, you could make a phone call that would get rid of one of your competitors and make me ignore you for a long time."

Pulo followed Kaul and Maik out of the building and back to the car, which was still exactly where Maik Kehn had double-parked it. Kaul placed a consoling hand on Pulo's shoulder. "You're not going to like this, but the chances of finding Ayt's moon blade aren't good."

"So Gee was telling the truth back there?" Pulo hadn't been able to discern anything about the man's physical state besides his fear and distress, but he wasn't nearly as skilled in Perception as some Green Bones.

The Fist shrugged. "Anyone on the wrong side of the jade business tends to get upset as soon as they see me, so it's nearly impossible to tell for sure if they're being truthful. Not that Perception is ever perfect about things like that. And some people are good at lying." Kaul leaned against the side of the Duchesse Priza and lit a cigarette, then offered the pack to

the Maiks and to Pulo, who took one only because his nerves were already too frayed to refuse. It was a foreign brand he was unfamiliar with, and he coughed on the first inhale.

“I think he was telling the truth, though,” Kaul said. “Sounds like your thief didn’t have the moon blade anymore when he saw Gee yesterday. That’s no surprise. No one with half a brain would steal that much jade only to put the word out to crooks and smugglers afterward, as if selling a bike in a classified ad. Nuo must’ve had a buyer lined up beforehand.”

Maik Kehn pointed to the cracked watch and the rings Pulo was holding. “At least you got some of the jade back.”

Pulo closed his hand around the consolation items. Kaul and his Fists had been so animated when talking about how they would use Ayt’s moon blade to their advantage against the Mountain clan if they found it. Now they appeared mildly disappointed but perfectly calm, enjoying their smokes and looking at their watches as if wondering what else needed to be done this afternoon before dinnertime. If he’d become a proper jade warrior like he’d once hoped to, would he have been anything like these Fists? Pulo’s hands were still shaky as he took another shallow pull on the cigarette. It went down smoothly this time. It was hard to imagine being a man for whom a day like this was nothing special. Right now, he would give anything to be back in the shop with Isin and Malla, doing something mundane like cleaning tools.

“I don’t know what to do,” Pulo said helplessly. “I don’t see how I could find out who Nuo sold the moon blade to and get it back within the next twenty-four hours. Ayt will find out what’s happened, and I’ll have to bear the consequences.”

Perhaps, Pulo mused, if he cut off his ear and begged for his and Malla’s lives, Ayt would be merciful and let them leave Janloon to live elsewhere. If they were disgraced together, maybe Malla would want to stay with him. The thought made him feel briefly, delusionally optimistic.

“You sound like a lame dog waiting to be shot,” Maik Tar said, looking at Pulo with dubious amusement. “Maybe Isin’s shop will be forced to close. But you’re just an apprentice with a bit of jade, you can’t even be twenty-four, I’m guessing. Ayt won’t kill you. It’s beneath her.”

“It’s not just about me,” Pulo muttered, but he didn’t elaborate. He didn’t feel like talking about Malla being Abukei, about her being in jail for Nuo’s crime and how much worse it would be for her than for him.

“In my opinion,” said Kaul Hilo, “you should find your master and ask *him* who stole Ayt’s moon blade.”

The Maiks nodded at Kaul’s suggestion. Pulo looked between them in confusion. “Isin wouldn’t admit it to the police, but he knows his nephew was the thief.”

Kaul shook his head slowly, as if Pulo were a child. “What kind of person would risk stealing a moon blade belonging to the Pillar of the Mountain clan? They must have something more to gain than money, and some reason to be confident the Mountain’s Green Bones won’t find them and take the moon blade back along with their head.” Kaul dropped his cigarette and ground it out. “It doesn’t sound to me like Nuo had either of those things. So he was a tool. Someone had him steal the blade, and that person is either an enemy of Ayt Madashi or an enemy of Isin Nakokun. I know most of Ayt’s enemies, and personally, as one of them, it seems too petty. But maybe someone would like to see the master jade setter’s business and reputation destroyed.”

Pulo tried to wrap his head around the unlikely idea. “Who on earth would be an enemy of Isin?” Green Bone customers from all clans respected Isin. He was neutral and inoffensive, dedicated to the perfection of his craft. Pulo had never heard the jade setter speak badly of anyone, not even Nuo. He was generous with money; he paid Malla much more than the normal rate for an Abukei assistant and often gave her large bonuses. He was unambitious, offered advice readily, and had no business rivals to speak

of. To Pulo's knowledge, the man didn't even have any former wives or girlfriends who held a grudge against him.

"A man doesn't have to be unkind or unlikable to have enemies," Kaul pointed out. "Sometimes, it's good people who're hated for who they are. But you're Isin's apprentice, you would know him best."

Pulo had an uncomfortable feeling that was not true at all. Kaul Hilo opened the car door, and the Maik brothers took that as their cue to stub out their cigarettes and do likewise. "I can't ask Isin anything," Pulo said. "I don't know where he is."

"Maybe he doesn't want you to ask him, then. If there's anyone who might know why, you should talk to them." Kaul got into the car. His lieutenants followed suit, leaving Pulo standing bereft on the narrow sidewalk.

Maik Tar leaned out the open rear window and said, "Sometimes the gods rain shit on us. Good luck, kid." The Duchesse Priza rolled down the street and turned the corner, leaving Pulo staring after it.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CRIME

DETECTIVE TAN LEANED BACK IN HIS SEAT, FROWNING DOWN AT THE recovered jade watch and rings that Pulo had placed on his desk, then back up at the apprentice. The policeman's dubious glare made his deep-set eyes appear to recede even farther into his head. "That's quite a story."

"It's all true," Pulo insisted. "Kaul Hiloshudon himself can corroborate what Three-Fingered Gee told us."

"First, you refuse to volunteer any information or answer any of my questions. Then you call and leave a cryptic message that leads me to a dead body with its throat cut. Now you walk into my office with some of the stolen jade on your hands and you expect me to believe what you say? Why shouldn't I arrest you for the murder of Nuo Donjunin?"

Pulo had made it through the day by refusing to think about what had happened the previous night. "I didn't want to kill Nuo. I only wanted to find out where he'd taken the moon blade, but he was out of his mind with the Itches and attacked me. You saw what he did to his own arms and legs." Pulo's stomach lurched upward, and he felt queasy again. "The moon blade's still missing, but there's no doubt Nuo took it from the shop. Arrest me if you have to, but let Malla go."

"Do you think the police station is a pawnshop where you can offer trades?" Detective Tan's no-nonsense mustache twitched over his lips.

“You’ve given me a corpse that can’t incriminate itself, along with a secondhand description that only vaguely matches him, supplied by a jade smuggler under threat of mutilation. It’s not even good enough to prove Nuo’s guilt beyond a doubt, much less clear your friend of wrongdoing.”

Everything that had happened over the past two days crashed over Pulo all at once and the last reserves of his composure vanished. A guttural noise escaped his throat as he slammed his hand down on the detective’s desk, making the jade pieces jump. “Why are you so determined to pin this on Malla? Just admit it! It’s because she’s Abukei and that’s the easy answer.”

Detective Tan rose from his seat with a hard stare. “You think I’m a bigot who’s keeping a young woman locked up because I’m lazy?” The detective had never struck Pulo as a dangerous man, but he was large enough to be physically intimidating, and the anger that rolled off him now made Pulo regret his outburst. “Do you think I’d be doing her any favors, letting her go free with the suspicion of theft hanging over her like an executioner’s axe? When the Mountain starts asking questions, how long do you think it’ll take for your neighbors to start pointing fingers?”

Pulo muttered, “She could leave the city. I’d help her.”

Tan gave him a pitying look. “I’ve been a Janloon cop for twenty years. I’ve seen what the Green Bones do to jade thieves, especially the ones that run. I’ve seen what happens to Abukei women with no prospects or protection. She’s in a cell right now, but at least she’s safe. I’m not releasing her until her innocence or guilt is established, or time runs out.”

The energy drained out of Pulo’s head. He collapsed into the nearest chair. Outside the detective’s office window, the late-afternoon sun was beginning its descent in the sky. Tan could only hold Malla for another day without charging her. Ayt Mada would be returning to the shop tomorrow afternoon. Time was nearly out.

Seeing his disconsolate expression, Tan walked out from behind his desk and filled a small paper cup from the water cooler in the corner of his

office. He handed it to Pulo, who accepted it and gulped it down without a word.

“That old jade setter is lucky to have such loyal employees,” Tan grumbled. He leaned against the edge of his desk and regarded Pulo with arms crossed. “Neither you nor Malla would talk to me because of your loyalty to Isin. So you protected Nuo. But that means you also protected whoever Nuo was working for.”

Pulo lifted his head, remembering what Kaul Hilo had said: *Nuo was a tool*. “Kaul and his Fists think someone arranged the theft to ruin Isin’s reputation and livelihood.”

Tan nodded slowly. “I have the same suspicion.”

“Who would take such a big risk to accomplish that?” Pulo asked. “And why hire someone as unreliable and jade sensitive as Nuo to do the job?”

The detective’s heavy lips came together in a straight line, deepening the furrows between his nose and mouth. “Was Isin’s nephew a regular shine user?”

“I think so. I saw an empty vial in the trash can in his apartment.”

“The autopsy found only trace amounts of shine in Nuo’s blood. Not nearly as much as you’d expect, considering he knew he was jade sensitive and yet was preparing to steal more jade than he’d ever handled in his life. It seems Nuo took a weak dose, enough to allow him to handle jade for a short while without losing control—but not enough to protect him from the effects of overexposure.”

Pulo’s skin had begun to prickle uncomfortably. “What are you saying?” he asked, although he already knew the answer.

“Someone gave Nuo bad shine, knowing he would lose his sanity and die from the Itches after committing the crime. So he can never reveal who he was working for.” Detective Tan leaned forward intently as Pulo shrank back in the chair. “Now do you understand why your friend is safer in jail?”

Pulo's throat bobbed in a difficult swallow. He'd been trying desperately to clear Malla of suspicion, thinking that after she was released, he could somehow protect her. What a foolish, arrogant thing to imagine. He'd barely been able to protect himself against Nuo, and Nuo had been horribly used and discarded by someone far more ruthless. The hard truth was that he was out of his depth, and there was no escape from the trap until the real jade thief was found and the moon blade recovered.

He raised miserable eyes to the policeman. "What do you need? Is there anything I can tell you now that would help?"

The detective drew back, searching Pulo's face for sincerity. "Do you know where or from whom Nuo was getting his shine?"

Pulo shook his head. "That basement in the Crossyards where I found him yesterday—I've seen him go there before. I thought it might be where he bought or sold drugs."

"We're looking into who owns the building," Tan said. "Do you know anything else about Nuo? Where did he work? Who were his friends?"

"I didn't know Nuo well," Pulo admitted, with some shame now that the man was dead. "Malla talked to him more than I did."

Tan scowled. "She still hasn't said anything. She might as well be a penitent."

Pulo gripped the armrests of the chair. "Let me talk to her, please. She doesn't know what's happened since she was arrested. She could help us."

One of Tan's eyebrows tilted sharply like a checkmark. "She could help us? As if we're all working together now, after how entirely uncooperative you've both been?" When Pulo had the consideration to look chagrined, the detective snorted. "She may not want to talk to you, anyway. The only thing she's made clear is that she won't talk to anyone except Isin."

Pulo sagged under the weary sense of hurt that lapped over him like a cold tide. He'd been running around the city with Malla's freedom and

safety at the forefront of his stressed-out mind, but she hadn't asked to see him at all. "Isin's gone."

Detective Tan jerked upright. "What do you mean he's gone?"

Pulo slid even farther down in the chair. "He wasn't in the shop this morning. He took a stash of money and jade and left a note telling me the shop was mine if I wanted it."

Detective Tan grabbed the phone receiver off his desk and dialed so urgently his finger slammed into the metal stopper after every swishing spin of the rotary plate. "Report Isin Nakokun as missing, and start a search right away," he ordered a subordinate on the other end of the line. "Contact the Haedo Shield clan to see if they've had any contact with him, and go to his home and his business." Tan hung up and barked at Pulo, "Why didn't you call me right away when you couldn't find Isin? Didn't you think your master might be in danger?"

Pulo stared at the policeman, aghast. He'd been too angry and disappointed with Isin for abandoning them that it hadn't occurred to him the jade setter's disappearance might not be what it seemed. As if lashed by a hot whip, his mind began to race through possibilities. "Do you think he ran because the real jade thief was after him?" Pulo leapt to his feet. "Or did someone already get to him and force him to leave a note so I wouldn't report him missing?"

"Don't rush to conclusions." Detective Tan raised a hand to slow Pulo down, but the unchanged, worried expression on his face was not reassuring. "Can you think of where he might've gone? Wait, hold on to your thoughts." Tan strode for the door, jerking his chin over his shoulder to indicate that Pulo was to follow. "You're right that Malla could help us. Let's see if she won't talk now."



MALLA WAS SITTING CROSS-LEGGED, eyes closed and back slumped, on the single cot bolted to the wall, in the same clothes she'd been wearing two nights ago. A metal tray with the remains of an institutional meal lay on the floor at the foot of the bed. There was nothing else in the cell; it was not made for holding people for more than a few days at a time. Previous bored occupants had scratched names and crude obscenities on the bare concrete surfaces.

When the guard swung aside the bars, Malla opened her eyes. At the sight of Pulo, her dry lips parted in a small oval of surprise and relief, but seeing Detective Tan come in behind him, her face shuttered. She looked between the two men in confusion, the dark rings under her eyes made starker by harsh yellow lighting.

An ache caught Pulo in the chest. "Malla." He wanted to drop to his knees and throw his arms around her, never letting go, but in that moment, all he could do was say her name.

The guard closed the cell door with a clang. "What's going on?" Malla's voice was small and hoarse. "Where's Isin?"

"I don't know. We can't find him." Pulo swallowed thickly, unsure of where to even begin. "Nuo got the Itches. He's...he's dead now."

Malla drew a sharply audible breath. Her mouth fell slack with dismay. To Pulo's surprise, she curled forward, dropping her face and swiping her eyes fiercely with the knuckles of her thumbs. "Poor Nuo," she whispered. "What a poor, gullible fool. A stupid kid. Just like me."

Pulo didn't see how Malla was anything like Nuo at all. He sat down slowly next to her on the cot. They'd worked near each other in the shop's cramped workroom for years, yet even now, sitting close enough to lift his hand and touch her wet cheek, Pulo felt as if an invisible but impermeable barrier snaked between them. He'd pretended it was nothing, convinced himself that his feelings were only natural for someone in close proximity

to a woman his own age, that they ought to be ignored. He'd kept up the wall that separated them with the lie that he didn't want to get closer.

So often, he'd thought to ask Malla a question about herself, to learn more about her life and her family, to compliment her for something nice she was wearing or the way her hair looked, to ask her shyly if she wanted to go out for dinner with him, maybe see a movie. Each time he'd bitten his tongue. Each time, the barrier between them had thickened even as he pressed himself against it to gaze at her. With a stab of self-loathing, he wished he could undo all the moments he'd made the same cowardly choice, so that right now, she would see some reason to trust him.

"Malla," he said, gathering the dregs of his courage and resolve, "the moon blade is still missing. Isin left, and Ayt Madashi is going to show up in person tomorrow. I don't care if she's angry enough to burn the shop to the ground, I don't care if I have to cut off my ear and beg for my life. I can handle all of that as long as you're safe." He couldn't bring himself to look into her face, but he managed to focus on Malla's hands, clasped tightly in her lap, as he forced out the words. "That night, you phoned me for help. I'd do anything to answer that call. I'm not much of a Green Bone, and I know I can't protect you the way I wish I could, but I'd still give my life. If the Mountain spares us, I'd leave Janloon. I'd leave my family and clan status and everything else, to start over again with you, if you'll let me."

Malla had gone stone still and quiet next to him. "Ori," she said, whispering his personal name in a soft, pained voice. "You don't know what you're saying. You're bright and clean and have a future. You can't be with someone like me." She lifted her head, lashes wet with unshed tears, and gave him the wannest, saddest smile he'd ever seen. She turned to Detective Tan. Pulo had almost forgotten the policeman was still standing near the bars with his arms crossed, giving them space, but nevertheless bristling with impatience.

“I met with Nuo that evening,” Malla confessed. “He said he wanted to apologize for being rude to me earlier, so I suggested we get a meal together at the Temple District night market, not far from the shop. I wasn’t interested in his apology, but I wanted to confront him about using shine and the way he was treating Isin. Some things he’d said made me think that...” Malla hesitated. “That he knew about me. And that he was connected to...*him*.”

The detective’s gaze was sharp as a drill. “Was he?”

Malla gave a stiff, frightened nod and shrank back against the cold concrete wall as if to disappear into it. Her words came with increasing difficulty, as if she were fighting to get them out. “I tried to make Nuo see that he was being tricked and used. The same way I had been. But he wouldn’t hear it. He drew a talon knife and said if I didn’t go to the shop with him and unlock the safe, he would take me instead of the moon blade. He would take me back.”

Pulo was lost. “Back to where?”

“Back to *whom*,” Detective Tan corrected. He hissed a breath through his teeth and crouched down to bring his face level with Malla. She began to cry, silently, curving her spine away from Pulo and hiding her face from him even as he reached out to her in abject bewilderment.

“I need proof.” Tan was sympathetic but firm. “You can’t protect Nuo *or* Isin with your silence anymore. Do you have anything concrete that ties Nuo to Washo Kunimun?”

“Washo?” Pulo repeated, uncomprehendingly. “The...businessman?”

Malla spoke over the raised hunch of her shoulder. “Nuo was working at one of Washo’s companies. Amaric Best. I don’t know if he started working there before or after Washo found out he was Isin’s nephew. I don’t know if Nuo ever interacted with Washo directly. That man has always protected himself with layers of other people, you know that.”

“Nuo didn’t say that Washo had given him directions?”

Malla's voice was barely audible. "All I learned from Nuo is that he was given shine and promised a fortune for delivering the most valuable item he could steal from the jade setter's shop. That's why he was always hanging around, looking for the right opportunity."

Detective Tan stood, his face grim. "You're all in danger until we have enough evidence to arrest Washo and prove our case even to No Peak. We don't know where Isin is now, but we need to find him and keep him safe. Where could he have gone?"

Pulo had been swiveling his head between the detective and Malla with the growing unpleasant sensation that he'd hit his head and the impact had rearranged parts of his brain so he could no longer understand the same basic concepts as everyone else. Why did Tan and Malla seem to have previous knowledge that he didn't? Why were they convinced the wealthy Lantern Man, Washo Kunimun, was involved?

Pulo opened his mouth to demand they explain everything to him clearly, from the beginning, but two words that Malla had said in passing tickled his memory and sent a different thought jumping the queue to the front of his mind. "Amaric Best," he blurted, remembering the scrap of paper Isin had found in the trash and pocketed yesterday morning, seemingly as an afterthought. "Isin and I found a pay stub in Nuo's apartment with the company's name on it."

Malla and Detective Tan stared at Pulo. "If Isin knows," Malla whispered with dawning alarm, "then that's where he's gone. To meet with that monster."



"WE MIGHT BE TOO LATE," Detective Tan grumbled as he hurried down the hallways of the precinct office, Pulo running after him. "Find me the address of Washo Kunimun," Tan barked at one of the junior police officers

hanging around the water cooler. “Yes, *that* Washo Kunimun, and yes, *right now*.” He grabbed his hat and coat.

“I don’t understand,” Pulo protested.

“Washo has the moon blade.” How the detective could declare this with certainty, Pulo still didn’t know. “He’s holding it for ransom, knowing Isin needs it back to save Malla’s life, and his business, and his personal reputation as a jade setter. They’re a danger to each other. They have been for years, but now there’s no avoiding it.”

The junior officer returned with an address hastily copied onto a slip of paper. Tan grabbed it and strode out of the building into the parking lot, Pulo on his heels, still reeling with confusion. “I’m coming with you.”

“Then get in.” The detective got behind the steering wheel of an unmarked police car. It started moving before Pulo had even pulled the passenger door shut. “Did Isin ever tell you anything about Washo?”

“No,” Pulo said, searching his memory as Tan took a right turn out of the parking lot. “Isin didn’t talk much about anyone. But I *saw* Washo, yesterday, at the Kaul estate, having lunch with the Horn of No Peak. It sounded like he was asking for patronage for an election campaign.” Pulo tried to remember what the man had said to him. It hadn’t seemed important at the time. “Washo told me he’d tried to buy Isin out in the past, to expand the shop into a chain, but Isin wouldn’t sell. He said he hoped Isin would change his mind.”

“Washo Kunimun, running for the Royal Council.” Tan made a noise of disgust. “So that’s why he’s resorted to blackmail, to tie up loose ends. Having backed Isin into a corner, he can finally force him to sell.”

“Are you saying this whole thing is an old business dispute over the *shop*?” The idea that someone with the stature and wealth of Washo Kuni would stoop to feuding with a small business owner like Isin was beyond belief.

“Not just the shop. Not at all,” the detective muttered grimly. “Long ago, I warned Isin he was taking too great a risk, one that would come back to hurt him. Washo only wants the shop so he can finally shut Isin down, for being a thorn in his side for so many years.”

“You can’t be serious.” Pulo wondered if he’d been yanked inside an elaborate joke. “A rich financier who owns a bunch of companies has a grudge against a jade setter whose shop is probably smaller than Washo’s bathroom?”

They hit the General’s Ride thoroughfare at the worst time, with everyone in Janloon eager to get home for dinner. Detective Tan cursed the slow-moving traffic and turned on the police lights. Slowly, cars inched out of the way to make room for them to pass. Some of them honked in irritation. *They moved faster when it was Kaul Hilo’s car*, Pulo thought. But the police in Janloon were a lower tier of law enforcement, not as respected or feared as Green Bones.

“I’m not sure Isin would want me to tell you this, but I don’t see how there’s a choice—you’re caught up in the shit now.” Tan glanced at Pulo’s dumbfounded expression before turning back to the road. “When your master was starting out in his trade, he spent many months with Abukei artisans in their villages, learning traditional jade-carving techniques. It’s how he got so good at what he does. He fell in love with a woman there. She promised to join him in Janloon, but on the way, she went missing. Vanished completely. Isin went to the police and they assigned the case to the most junior officer on the force. That was me.”

The detective’s grip tightened on the steering wheel as he wove through the crush of vehicles, narrowly avoiding a rickshaw that darted across the road. “We searched for months and never found her. She wasn’t unique. Abukei women go missing every year. She was just another statistic. The case went cold, but Isin, poor bastard—he never got over her. He would phone me regularly for years afterward, hoping for some new information.”

Pulo thought of the photographs he'd glimpsed inside Isin's drawer. The young woman in the images—the jade setter really had loved her. It was grief, not shame, that had made him hide them away. He'd taken the pictures with him when he'd left the shop yesterday, along with his jade and money.

“Years went by. Isin's reputation grew and his shop became known as the best in Janloon.” Tan slid another glance over at Pulo, who'd fallen silent. “Washo told you the truth about the next part. He approached Isin as a potential business partner. This was about eight years ago. During the negotiations, Washo invited Pulo to one of the famously lavish parties he held at his mansion, filled with food and drink and prostitutes.”

Tan honked and sped through a red light, finally getting through the worst of the traffic. The policeman shoved a pair of sunglasses onto his face as they drove west into the slanting red evening light. He said nothing more for a whole minute, abruptly hesitant to go on.

Pulo prodded him, “What happened at the party?”

“It's what happened after the party that matters. When Isin got into his car at the end of the night, he sensed someone lying on the floor in the back seat. Most people, in that moment, would be afraid of being mugged and killed and having their car stolen, but back then Isin wore enough jade to Perceive that the stranger behind him was terrified for their life. He didn't look behind himself or say a word, he just drove home. When he arrived, he opened the back door of the car and found an Abukei teenage girl.”

Pulo's heart fell into his stomach like an elevator with its cables snapped.

Tan said, “The girl begged Isin not to return her to Washo's mansion. She'd been one of five young women in her village told to meet with a recruiter who promised to find them well-paying jobs in Janloon. Instead, they were taken to a warehouse and locked in cages. The four older ones were taken somewhere else the following night, but the youngest was taken

to Washo's mansion, to be used by him and his business associates. She was there for six weeks before she escaped during the distraction of the party."

"That was Malla."

Tan nodded without looking at him. The detective was accustomed to delivering terrible news in a factual way, but Pulo was not practiced at receiving it. Awful images crowded unbidden into his mind. *Malla*. He clutched the armrest of the car door with white knuckles, as if to hang on to it for stability, or perhaps out of a sudden desire to pull the handle of the moving vehicle and throw himself out in escape.

"Isin came to me with the whole story," Tan went on. "I had more clout by then, and using everything Malla told us, we traced the other four girls all the way to Ygutan. We lost the trail there because they disappeared into the Ygutanian military breeding program, but we made a dozen arrests for human trafficking. The one man we could never get to was the one at the top of the pyramid. Washo was untouchable. We never had enough proof to tie him directly to the scheme. And you can't go about accusing one of the most wealthy Lantern Men of the No Peak clan unless you're godsdamned sure the evidence will stick."

Pulo managed to speak. "And you think...he's still involved?"

"More Abukei women have disappeared since then, I know that much." Tan's broad jaw stiffened with long simmering frustration. "The Ygutanians buy them for sex and labor, but most of all, they want surrogates with jade immunity, to create soldiers with enough tolerance to wear jade like Kekonese Green Bones, who can compete with the Espenians and their new drug. Washo Kunimun has many businesses, but one of them is supplying the foreigners with women that few people will notice when they go missing."

When Abukei women vanished, no territory was endangered, no tribute-paying businesses were damaged, no Lantern Men complained, no jade was at stake. It was not an issue that would ever merit the attention of the Green

Bone clans. That left it in the province of the less respected and less powerful civil law enforcement, who operated under the constant shadow of the clans and possessed little jurisdiction over the actions of the highest-ranking clan members.

Detective Tan turned off the General's Ride, driving past the Monument District before entering the North Sotto neighborhood. The common urban sights that Pulo was accustomed to from the downtown east side—squat shops, aggressive street hawkers, and brisk food carts on narrow roads—gave way to new condominium buildings, trendy eateries offering foreign cuisines, expensive cars parked along the sides of wide boulevards. Everywhere Pulo looked he saw brightness: Janloon burgeoning with activity and growth as it met the rest of the world and raced toward the future.

Pulo pressed his forehead against the cool window glass, watching the orange streetlamps come on. Bright lights distracted from darkness, while money and success flowed through the gutters toward the cunning and the ruthless. Jade was not the only thing that was gained at the expense of lives.

"Washo denied any knowledge of Malla's existence," Detective Tan said. "He pretended not to understand why Isin refused to accept his business partnership. That would've caused enough resentment as it was, but Isin bringing Malla to the police led to arrests that must've cost Washo a great deal, too much for him to ever forget."

"So all this time," Pulo intoned, "Washo has kept a grudge."

"The grudge is mutual. Isin believes that Washo, or someone like him, was responsible for the disappearance of the woman he loved a long time ago. Over the years, he's donated a lot of his own money to nearby Abukei tribes, to fund local programs that warn women about trafficking and to operate phone hotlines that report suspicious activity. He hears things from trustworthy friends, or idle talk among Green Bones who visit his shop, and sometimes he phones tips into my office, not only about missing women,

but about drug deals, robberies, assaults, and other crimes that fall beneath the notice of the Green Bone clans.”

That was why Isin never seemed to get any wealthier, no matter how well the shop did. It was also, Pulo realized with dawning shameful understanding, why Isin refused to move the shop or to expand it. As long as he remained in the neutral Haedo Shield clan, he was beholden to no one else. None of the major Green Bone clans and their business interests could compel him. The talented but unambitious and discreet jade setter was trusted by everyone and received hints of what went on in all the clans, across the entire city.

“You suspected it from the start.” Pulo’s words came out more accusatory than he intended. “When the moon blade was stolen, you thought Washo might be involved.”

Tan shot him a frown as he slowed the car, studying the house numbers. “Years have passed. There was no apparent connection between what happened back then and the theft at the shop. What could I do without any evidence? Isin and Malla wouldn’t talk. They’d already stopped believing the police could ever arrest Washo or bring them justice.” In a quieter voice, “I can’t blame them.”

Tan jerked the steering wheel and pulled aggressively up to the curb. “This is it.” Washo’s residence was a three-story white brick townhouse mansion in the Shotarian colonial style, with a clay roof and stone columns stretching up on either side of its tall windows. They got out of the car. “Stay here,” Tan ordered, taking out his badge.

Pulo remained by the vehicle, watching nervously as Tan approached the front door. Before the policeman could reach for the doorbell, the wall of front-facing windows on the third story shattered with a tremendous crash. Pulo jumped with a shout of alarm, flattening himself against the patrol car and instinctively throwing his arms over his head as shards of glass rained down onto the front walk. He heard Tan’s startled yell

—“*Fucking gods*”—followed by the sickeningly meaty thud of a human body hitting the concrete.

Pulo lowered his arms and stared. Washo Kunimun was unquestionably dead, if not from the impact of hitting the ground, then from the stab wound through the center of his chest, spilling red across his starched white button-up shirt.

Pulo looked up, slowly and fearfully, as if toward a solar eclipse. Isin stood at the shattered window on the third floor, holding Ayt Madashi’s wet moon blade. His expression couldn’t be read as he looked down at the scene, but for a second, Pulo imagined he saw the little frown of satisfaction with which the master jade setter would regard a finished bit of craft right before he handed it to the customer, a barely perceptible half second of reluctance to part with the product of his efforts, to surrender his work to fate. The sun dipped behind the green roof, and in shadow, Isin adjusted his bifocals and turned away.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MASTER

THE OFFICE OF THE HAEDO SHIELD CLAN WAS AN UNREMARKABLE LOW-RISE building located in the Monument District, across the street and directly behind Wisdom Hall, the seat of power for the country's Royal Council. Pulo had spent the last three hours sitting in the hallway outside the chamber where the five elders of the clan had hastily convened in the predawn hours to discuss the murder of a prominent Janloon businessman by a long-standing member of their clan. Thirty-six hours ago, Isin had told his apprentice he was going to appear before the elders of Haedo Shield. Pulo hadn't imagined this was what his master meant.

The jade setter had surrendered to the police without any resistance, handing over the gems he'd been wearing hidden under his plaid flannel shirt. Pulo couldn't stop seeing the replay in his mind of Washo's body hitting the sidewalk like a bag of meat, nor the sight of Isin being led away in handcuffs, shuffling in his usual unhurried way, even though he had just used enough jade-fueled Strength to hurl a larger man through a third-story window.

According to Washo's girlfriend, who was in the mansion at the time, Isin had arrived unarmed and respectful. Washo had been expecting the jade setter's appearance. The girlfriend brought out tea and snacks and went into another room, leaving them alone to discuss business. Twenty minutes later, she heard the crash that was Washo's body being hurled through the

window. When the police examined the room where the men had been meeting, they found a contract with Isin's signature, agreeing to sell his shop to Washo for a pittance, to take no further part in the running of the business, and to retire from jade setting permanently. It also forbade him from speaking about the deal or revealing any of their interactions.

Washo, it seemed, had been satisfied by Isin's abject surrender. Pulo had no trouble at all imagining an arrogant man like Washo Kunimun, who'd never before been punished for anything he did but instead achieved only more success, looking down at the bespectacled craftsman with his unfailingly humble and polite manner and callused hands, and feeling not the slightest bit of threat as he swung aside the painting over his desk and opened the hidden safe, taking out the valuable moon blade Nuo had delivered to him two nights ago.

The look of surprise on the financier's face when Isin had drawn Ayt Mada's blade and shoved it through his chest had remained frozen on his features for the cops to see.

Of course, Isin hadn't remained in police custody for even six hours. The clans judged and punished their own. Isin had broken aisho, the honor code of Green Bones that forbade killing those who did not wear jade. Furthermore, a member of Haedo Shield murdering a high-ranking Lantern Man of No Peak was an interclan affair. Isin was surrendered to Haedo Shield and was being held somewhere in the building; Pulo didn't know where.

The entrance to the meeting room was guarded by two Shieldbearers who followed Pulo's pacing with their eyes. Pulo couldn't hear anything that was going on behind the thick closed doors. The elders of the clan had been in discussion for the entire morning. Pulo was hungry; two packs of snack crackers from the vending machine down the hall wasn't much of a breakfast, but he refused to leave his fretful self-appointed vigil in the hall.

At last, the door opened and Pulo's aunt Uma appeared. Her perpetually disapproving eyes alighted on him and her mouth puckered as if sucking a lemon. She sighed. "Come in, then." Her face betrayed nothing as she held the door open and pointed Pulo into an empty chair at the table. Pulo saluted the clan leaders and sat down on the edge of the seat.

The clan elders of Haedo Shield, three men and two women, were all in their fifties or sixties. Aunt Uma was the youngest of them despite her silver hair. They all wore their jade conservatively around their necks and wrists. All five of them were wearing the distinctive flat cap and sash of the clan, although it looked as if they might've donned them rather hastily. Unlike the leaders of the major clans, they were not famous, they rarely trained or socialized with other Green Bones, and the average citizen wouldn't know their names. The unfailingly neutral clan didn't permit dueling for status or jade, and it didn't even hold any seats in the Kekon Jade Alliance, which regulated the country's production and distribution of jade. The entire purpose of the Haedo Shield clan was to remain out of the news.

The five elderly Green Bones glanced at each other, as if debating who should break the news to Pulo. Reluctantly, Aunt Uma shouldered the task. "Isin Nakokun will be executed tomorrow morning," she told him matter-of-factly. "Since he doesn't have any next of kin, he's asked that his financial assets be left to his assistant, Malla. He's bequeathed his shop in the Temple District to you, his apprentice, if you want it. He did sign a contract to sell the business, but the police and lawyers agree it was done under duress, and the purchaser is dead, so you may do with it as you wish." Uma reached under the table, then placed a black cloth-wrapped bundle in front of Pulo. "I believe this item belongs to one of the shop's customers."

Pulo could barely bring himself to look at, much less pick up, the moon blade that he'd spent the last three days chasing. "Respected elders, please reconsider your decision," Pulo pleaded. "Isin-jen doesn't deserve to be

executed. Washo Kunimun committed terrible crimes for years and was never punished. He held a grudge against Isin for standing up to him, and for knowing the truth about the things he's done. He hired Isin's own nephew to steal the moon blade from the shop, knowing it would land Malla in jail and kill Nuo."

"That doesn't change the fact that Isin Nakokun broke aisho as well as the code of our clan," said the bald elder with the long face. "It wasn't his place to punish Washo."

"Then whose was it?" Pulo cried, unable to prevent his voice from rising. "The police haven't been able to stop Washo. The clans don't care about or handle crimes that don't affect them. Washo thought nothing about the people he used and destroyed. He would've ruined Isin without a thought while continuing to grow richer and more powerful. He was even planning to run for the Royal Council. How can you execute Isin, a man who's only ever tried to do good, when Washo was the one who deserved to die?"

The semicircle of elders around the table regarded Pulo with pity but no indication of pliability. "We understand how you feel," said the older woman, the one with her long hair pulled back in a fan-shaped jade hairpiece. "Isin's long-suffering heart is in the right place. Hardly anyone has a bad word to say about him, and his skills are an unparalleled asset to the Green Bone community. But ever since he fell out with Washo and took the Abukei girl as an assistant, we've been worried about how personally involved he's getting with issues that might force the clan into a compromising position."

"We thought there would be no trouble so long as he kept his charitable efforts discreet and the Abukei woman out of sight," Aunt Uma said. "I persuaded him to take on an apprentice, hoping it would cause him to focus on his business and passing on his skills within the Haedo Shield clan. And

for years, it seemed that was the case. It's a tragedy that Isin's nephew ever met Washo and all this had to happen."

A heavysset clan elder in a red track jacket said, "No matter how noble his motives or justifiable Isin's actions, the fact remains that by killing a wealthy Lantern Man of No Peak, he's placed us at odds with one of the major clans."

Pulo's hands and eyes felt hot and swollen with dread. They'd made up their minds. Nothing he could say or do would sway them. He couldn't help Isin any more than he'd been able to help Malla. "What kind of a clan is Haedo Shield, if you won't even defend one of our own members for doing the right thing?"

"Have you learned nothing from your master?" replied the bald elder sternly. "Isin could do the things he did—running the city's best jade-setting shop, bringing on an assistant, quietly helping exploited Abukei, sneaking tips to the police—*only* because he was a member of Haedo Shield who was always trusted to remain neutral and stay out of clan conflicts."

The elder in the track jacket added, "We're a tiny clan compared to the Mountain or No Peak, but we serve a vital function. Our work is unglamorous and overlooked, but we protect the institutions of this country that serve all the people. Do you think we could continue to do that if we were to set ourselves against the big clans?"

"It's not hard to see that the Mountain and No Peak are two ships aimed at each other," rejoined the bald elder. "Both clans have new Pillars who want to grow their clans and overtake their rivals. We have to tread a careful path from now on. Our response to Isin's actions must follow the rules precisely. If we can't be objective about one of our own members, how can we be counted on to remain neutral if the clans go to war?"

This brought about taut nods of finality from around the table. Haedo Shield existed because all the other clans agreed it should have an annual government-funded budget and an allocation of jade would go to its

Shieldbearers to protect the royal family and the government. It was enemies with no one, and so it continued to exist for the good of all.

Pulo shook his head, desperation foaming in his guts. “You’re *sacrificing* him. I’ll leave Haedo Shield. I’ll tell the truth to anyone and everyone. I’ll do whatever I can to publicly expose Washo’s crimes, until everyone understands that Isin was wronged.”

“You could do that,” Aunt Uma conceded. “You would make enemies of Washo’s family and the No Peak clan, which surely won’t want one of its prominent Lantern Men posthumously slandered. You would throw away your own prospects and have no clan to depend on for protection. And you would drag your Abukei friend’s history out into the open.”

When Pulo was miserably silent, his aunt’s face softened and her voice lost its hard edge. “Isin knew what he was doing when he went to Washo’s home last night. He was ready to give his life to finally put an end to Washo’s crimes, and to make sure the man could never threaten Malla or the shop again. Would you reject what he did and what he is offering you now?”

Aunt Uma pushed the cloth bundle toward him. “We brought you into this room, not because you’re owed an explanation for the clan’s judgment, but because we hope you’ll understand your master’s choice, and that you’ll honor it with your actions. Take the moon blade, Pulo-jen. Go back to your friend and to the shop, and care for them both.”

Pulo’s eyes stung and his vision blurred. He picked up the moon blade. It was heavy in his hands—a priceless, one-of-a-kind object, a warrior’s treasure. He wanted to melt it down into slag. He wanted to throw it into the sea. It was worthless, just steel and wood and jade. It wasn’t alive, it didn’t love or feel, it didn’t hurt or mourn or suffer from guilt or the pain of failure. And yet it was coveted and considered more valuable than some lives.

“Can I talk to him?” Pulo asked. “One last time?”



ISIN WAS SITTING in what appeared to be a staff break room, with a cup of hot tea and a newspaper. He looked extremely tired—expending a surge of jade energy and then going through jade withdrawal was not easy for someone of his age who was out of practice—and his wiry beard wasn't as well groomed as it normally was, but he was otherwise the same old Isin. The jade setter looked up at his apprentice, blinking over the top of his glasses.

“Isin-jen...” Pulo didn't know what to say. He imagined the old master being led out placidly to the firing squad tomorrow morning, bullets punching into his body and ending his life, stilling those careful hands forever, and he felt such an overwhelming sense of horror that without thinking, he dropped to his knees. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“Ah.” Isin rubbed the back of his head and sighed apologetically. “A jade setter keeps everyone's secrets, doesn't he? Malla didn't want to ever speak of it. She was afraid you would look at her differently, that you would never see past it.”

Pulo opened his mouth to protest that it wasn't true, that they should've trusted him all along—but he swallowed the sour reflex. He *had* looked at Malla differently. He'd resisted his own feelings, refusing to get close, never trying to learn more about her family or her life—even without knowing the far worse taint she lived with beyond being Abukei. And he'd misjudged Isin all along, had looked down at his staid mannerisms and lack of ambition and seen reflected back his own fears of failure and stagnation, of not becoming a proper jade warrior, the type of person who moved through the world making ripples in his wake.

“You've had a very hard few days.” Isin put his hand on Pulo's shoulder and gave it a pat, as if he were conceding that the young man had been

putting in overtime and deserved to take off an hour early. “Don’t worry, the important thing is that it’s over now.”

Pulo said, “Did...you hear what happened to Nuo?”

Isin’s face sagged and he nodded sadly. “Neither of you should’ve been involved at all. Poor Nuo, I wish I could’ve been an uncle to him in the way he needed, then maybe he wouldn’t have become yet another person I couldn’t help. But some pieces are too damaged to fix.” He patted his own chest. “I’m that way too, Ori, just like an old watch that still works but has a deep crack down the center.”

Pulo pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. “Isn’t there anything we can do?” he croaked. “Any way to appeal the clan’s decision? To delay it? Or to escape? Isin-jen, if there’s any chance, please tell me. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“A few days ago, *you* were the one telling me what I should do, sharing all your bright ideas for the future, and now you’re acting like this?” Isin voiced a scolding grumble in the back of his throat, as if Pulo had stowed one of his tools in the wrong drawer. “Over many years, I’ve seen jade change hands in unexpected ways, so I know that people often don’t get what they deserve. But whatever you decide to do, if you find success and happiness, you’ll deserve it. You and Malla both. I’m glad Uma convinced me to take you on as an apprentice.” He tugged on Pulo’s sleeve, urging him to stand up. “I’m only a humble jade setter, but I’m content with the last thing I was able to fix.”



AUNT UMA LED him back to the meeting room. Pulo’s chest felt leaden as he spoke to the elders of Haedo Shield. “I’ll never forgive any of you. I won’t promise to remain neutral or to stay in the clan. But I’ll take over Isin’s shop and do my best to run it as he did.”

“Good,” said the old woman with the jade hair clasp. “That’s all we ask.”

As Pulo turned to go, a knock sounded on the door. One of the Shieldbearers opened it and said, with an expression of alertness and uncertainty, “Forgive the interruption, jens, but Kaul Lanshinwan is here. He’s asking to speak with you.”

“The Pillar of No Peak is here? Right now?” Aunt Uma sat up with a stiff spine and the other elders of Haedo Shield exchanged wary glances. Uma fidgeted with her sash. “Let him in, then.”

The sentry held open the door. Kaul Lan, the leader of the No Peak clan, entered, trailed by two bodyguards, who took up discreet places by the door. The elders of Haedo Shield stood and touched clasped hands to their foreheads, dipping into respectful salutes. Pulo stepped out of the way, hastily doing the same.

The Pillar returned the elders’ salute. “I understand you’ve already been discussing the situation for some time,” he said. “I would’ve come earlier, but I had to spend hours talking to the Janloon police about what happened.”

Pulo had never seen Kaul Lanshinwan in person before. The Pillar was in his early thirties, having come into the leadership less than a year ago after peacefully taking over the position from his grandfather. Pulo had heard it said by Green Bones who came around the shop that no one was entirely sure what to make of the new Pillar yet. There was some natural physical resemblance between Kaul Lan and his younger brother, but otherwise the two men were completely different. Pulo recalled the No Peak Fists he’d met yesterday as a trio of loping wolves, with their casually dangerous energy and youthful invincibility. The Pillar was a different type of Green Bone still, a sharp-eyed eagle on a rock, exuding an undeniable natural gravitas even in a room of clan leaders far older than him. A chain

of jade beads encircled his neck; more jade studded his forearm cuffs and belt. Even his bodyguards wore more jade than the elders of Haedo Shield.

“Kaul-jen,” said the bald, long-faced elder. “There was no need for you to hurry here in concern. Haedo Shield abhors any breach of aisho. The horrifying murder of one of No Peak’s top Lantern Men was the tragic result of a longstanding personal enmity between the two men involved, and does not in any way reflect our clan’s unwavering code of neutrality.”

Pulo’s teeth came down painfully hard on his tongue. *Say something*, he ordered himself. It would be an astonishingly mannerless breach of decorum, for someone of no rank to speak directly to the Pillar of a major clan without invitation, right in front of his own aunt and clan elders—but the gods had dropped this final chance in front of him. *What should he say?* What would convince Kaul Lan that Isin should be spared? Pulo would only have one chance. What if he said the wrong thing and brought No Peak’s anger down harder?

The Pillar took in the stern nods of the Haedo Shield leaders. His gaze drifted over to Pulo, and he paused curiously, perhaps Perceiving the young man’s invisibly churning distress. Pulo didn’t meet Kaul’s gaze, but he thought he might burst out of his skin.

Say something! He jerked his head up and opened his mouth. “Kaul-jen —”

Aunt Uma cleared her throat aggressively, cutting him off. “We’ve decided that Isin Nakokun will be executed for his crime tomorrow morning.”

Kaul Lan turned back to her. One of his eyes squinted. “Is that necessary?”

Uma blinked in surprise. “Surely,” she said, sounding less than sure, “the premeditated murder of a jadeless Lantern Man by a Green Bone of another clan requires a severe punishment.”

Kaul frowned. "I was told there were several extenuating circumstances surrounding Isin Nakokun's actions. Washo orchestrated the theft of a valuable jade weapon from Isin's shop, in an attempt to ruin him, did he not? And it led to his nephew's death. Unless Detective Tan was mistaken or lying, everything he presented to me suggests Washo was hiding other crimes for over a decade, and that he acted in retaliation against Isin first."

"It's true," Pulo blurted, his words and his feet stumbling forward. The elders glared at him ferociously for his rudeness, but he didn't care. "Kaul-jen, I've been Isin's apprentice for four years. I realize now that I didn't know anything about the anger and pain he kept to himself, but I still know this: He did everything for others. He didn't ask for more than he already had, and he never spoke badly even of those who deserved it. He didn't even wear his own jade, so he could set jade for his customers."

Pulo bowed his head. "Isin was a Green Bone and Washo was a jadeless man, but Washo was the one in a more powerful position. He enriched himself while ruining the lives of people beneath him, and no one would raise a finger against him, because of his status in your clan."

Aunt Uma hissed between her teeth at Pulo's words, knowing they might easily be read as criticism of No Peak. "Forgive my nephew for speaking rudely without permission, Kaul-jen," she said, motioning for the Shieldbearers to escort Pulo from the room. "The last few days have been extremely difficult for him. No Peak has thousands of Lantern Men, and can hardly be held responsible for the moral character of every one of them."

"No, but Isin's apprentice is speaking the truth." Kaul gestured for the Shieldbearers to remain where they were. "Washo's standing in No Peak allowed him to hide his wrongdoings, so long as they were aimed at people outside of the clan. I've been the Pillar for less than a year, so I can't say to what extent his crimes were known about and overlooked by others within the clan during my grandfather's leadership. But I'm the Pillar now. No Peak won't demand Isin Nakokun's execution. I have no authority over

your clan, so the decision is still yours, but personally, I think it's excessive."

The room was silent for a long minute. Pulo's heart was banging in his chest, not daring to hope. The elders seemed to be holding an urgent discussion among themselves consisting entirely of wide eyes and small eyebrow movements. The elder woman Green Bone said, "You're an epitome of the Divine Virtue of compassion, Kaul-jen. But the fact remains that Isin is a member of Haedo Shield and his acts of personal vengeance break our code of neutrality. We can't pardon him. What message would that send?"

"I'm not saying he should suffer no consequence," Kaul replied. "I'll have to deal with plenty of people in No Peak clamoring for Isin's head as well. The punishment still ought to be severe, for the sake of harmony in both our clans. I suggest stripping the jade setter of his assets, including his jade and his shop, and exiling him from Kekon." The Pillar shifted his solemn face back to Pulo, and offered, in a gentler voice, "He could be sent to Ygutan. No Peak has some connections in that country. Perhaps your master can still find something—or *someone*—to make life worthwhile."

The elders of Haedo Shield looked to each other again in silent conference, but there wasn't much more to say. Aunt Uma straightened her shoulders. She clasped her hands to her forehead and saluted deeply. "For a young Pillar, you're wise beyond your years, Kaul-jen. Your proposal is acceptable to us."

"Good." Kaul Lan turned to leave as unceremoniously as he'd arrived. His bodyguards glided silently into place behind him. The Pillar paused at the door and glanced over his shoulder at Pulo. "Isin's shop is a fixture in Janloon. I hope it stays that way. Even a place with a long and respected history needs new blood to change it for the better, and it's good to have something that all Green Bones in the city can agree on."



PULO UNFOLDED the black cloth on the counter. Ayt Madashi picked up the moon blade and examined the workmanship on the repaired hilt. Ayt was not as frightening as Pulo had imagined she would be when he'd expected to be pleading for her mercy. She wore an intimidating amount of jade, mounted in coiling silver bracelets up both of her bare arms, unique pieces that Isin had designed for her alone—but she didn't exude the calm menace of Gont Asch or the streetwise ferocity of his Fists. The Pillar of the Mountain clan was wearing blue slacks, sandals, and a sleeveless white blouse. Her hair was tied back simply.

"This moon blade has special meaning to me," Ayt said offhandedly, wrapping strong, slender fingers around the hilt and sighting down the blade as she tested its weight for any minuscule change. "My father gave it to me many years ago."

Pulo reminded himself that the blade that had pierced Washo Kunimun's chest less than a day ago was no virgin to blood. Ayt Mada had used it to kill her rivals and secure leadership of the Mountain after her father's death. She epitomized the ruthlessness of the Green Bone clans. Pulo couldn't believe he'd once wanted more than anything to be a part of her world.

"I'm sorry you had to wait an extra two days, Ayt-jen," Pulo said.

"The inconvenience was minor. The workmanship on the repair is flawless, as expected. Isin Nakokun deserves every bit of his acclaim as a master jade setter." Ayt sheathed the blade in one precise, nearly soundless motion, and turned to Pulo with narrowed eyes. "I'm surprised Isin-jen isn't here in person, since he's known for rarely leaving his shop. His absence would seem to confirm the rumors I've heard. Rumors I can hardly believe."

Pulo felt an urge to step back from the counter, but he didn't. "I don't know what you've heard Ayt-jen," he said, "but it's true that Isin-jen can no

longer run the business. He's left his life's work to me and his former assistant—a talented jade setter in her own right. We can't replace Isin, but we promise to run the shop with the same standards and values he's upheld for twenty years."

Pulo gathered his courage and called over his shoulder. "Malla, come out here for a minute, to greet the Pillar."

Malla stepped out from the back of the shop, wiping her hands on a cloth. She saluted Ayt Mada with her eyes lowered deferentially, but her shoulders were straight and proud, and there was no fear in her voice. Her expression was a brave promise. Her days of hiding in the back room were over. "Ayt-jen, you honor Isin and now us by trusting us with your jade."

The Pillar's gaze rested curiously on the pair of them. A faint suggestion of a smile moved her lips. "I'll do so again, when I have more jade that requires skillful attention. I hope your master has trained you well."

Pulo put his hand into Malla's. "I promise he has."

Their fingers remained entwined under the counter as they watched Ayt leave. One of the clan's Green Bones opened the door to the Pillar's car. Ayt got in, and the silver luxury sedan disappeared into the traffic of a Fifthday afternoon. Wordlessly, Pulo locked up the display cases as Malla wiped off the counter, working side by side as they went through the routine of tidying up the shop so it would be ready for business in the morning.

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